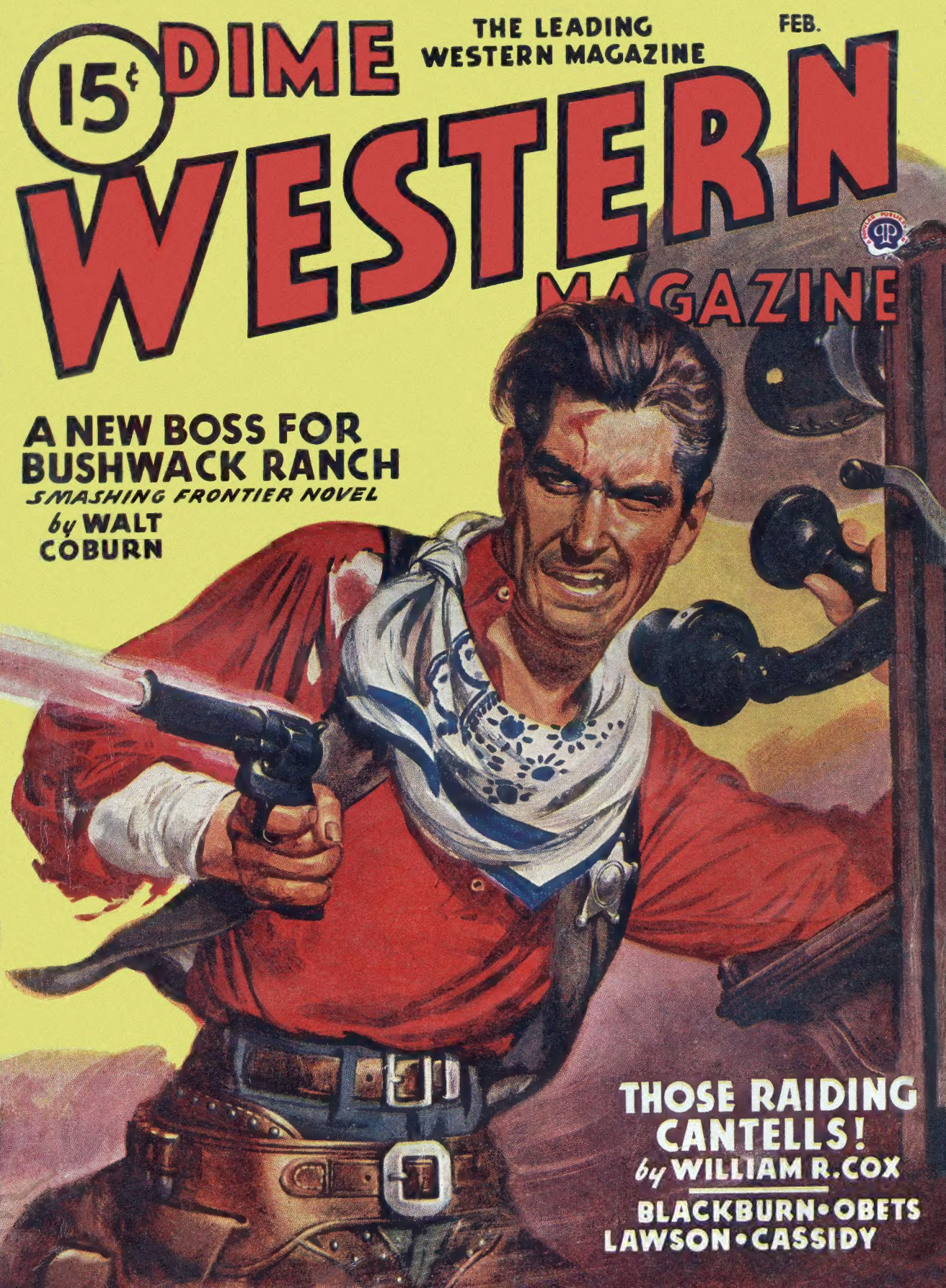
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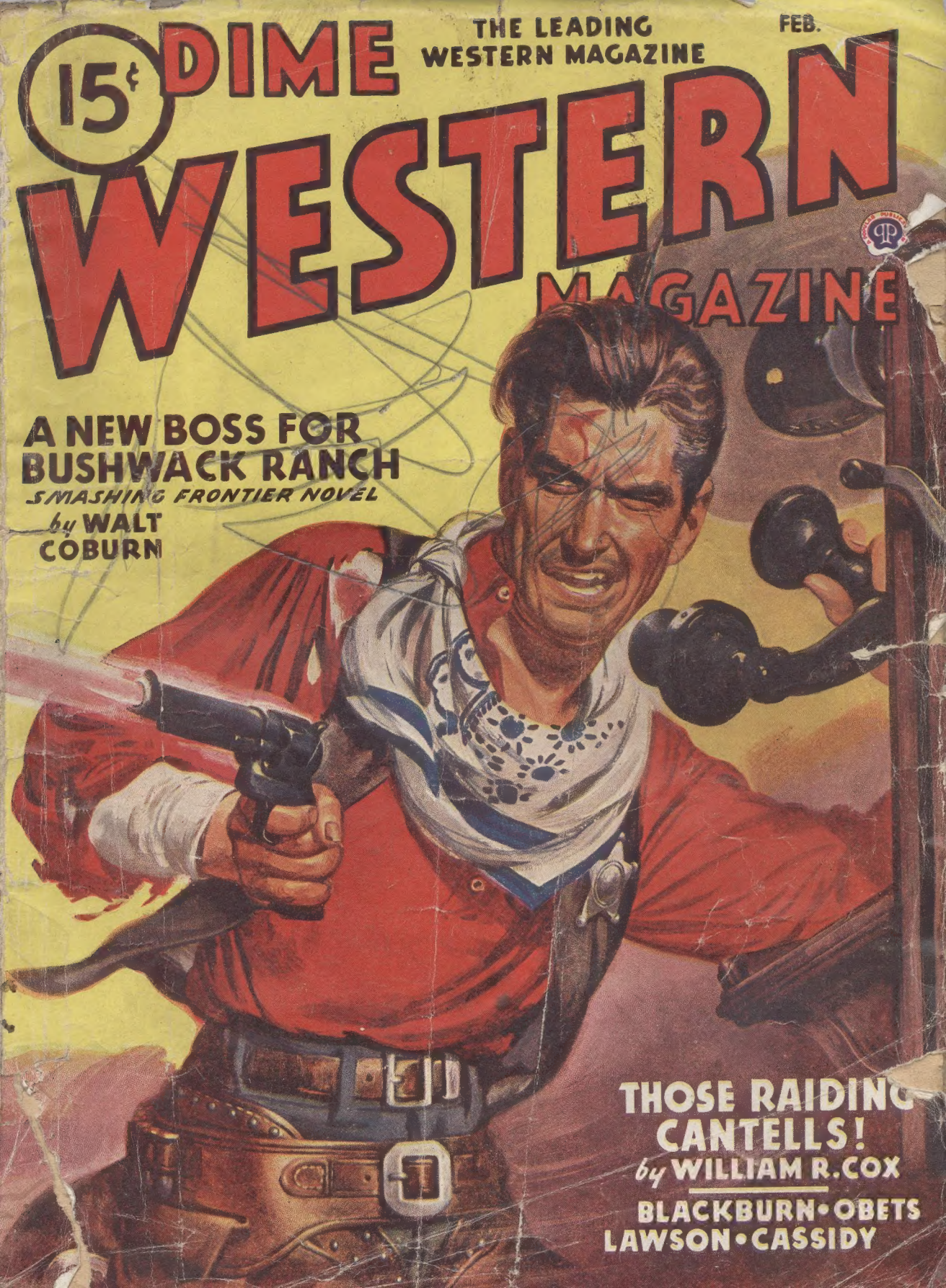

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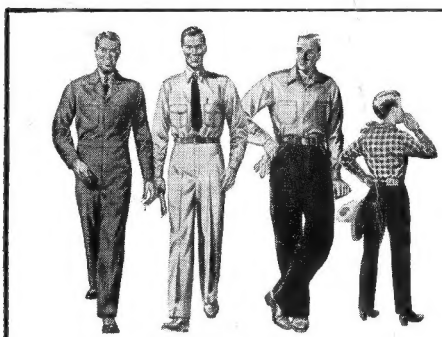

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VOLUME XLV FEBRUARY, 1946 NUMBER 2

Two Complete Western Novels

A New Boss for Bushwhack Ranch.....Walt Coburn 10
The big, ruddy-cheeked Britisher thought buying a haunted ranch would be "jolly good sport"..... Until, in the dead of a storm-slashed night, murderous gun-ghosts started their deadly ha'ant—for a jackpot of killers' gold!

Those Raiding Cantells!.....William R. Cox 52
When Big Red Cantell told him, "George Oleson's in Silo, Kid," young Grant Deal knew his hope of quitting the Wild Bunch were just as dead as he himself would be—if he tried to cut the bonds that bound him to that lawless crew!

Two Dramatic Western Novelettes

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Those carpetbagging yellowbacks in the white hoods were anathema to Big Jim Jericho .... Yet he must ride with them, or take a lonelier ride—to a sudden Texas grave!

Gun-Trap at Rebel River.....Art Lawson 82
Capt. Jack Bailey was determined to highjack those supply wagons for his starving men in gray—though the purchase price must be made in his own life's blood.

Four Outstanding Short Stories

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The lives of those two renegades were forfeit unless they fought as one.

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For the sake of the likeable kid who was his jail-pardner, Tensleep had to bust out of that hoosegow—to keep an appointment with a gallows' committee!

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The Federales were coming! But so was Cousin Pancho's dashing aide-de-camp, Pepe Amalia—riding backwards!

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Two guns, two graves .... two fighting Texan hearts!

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When the famous Judge Roy Bean held court, Blackstone took a back seat!

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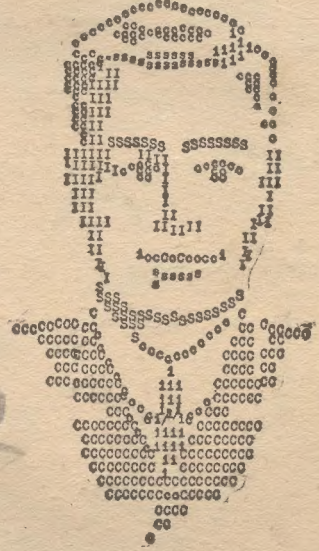

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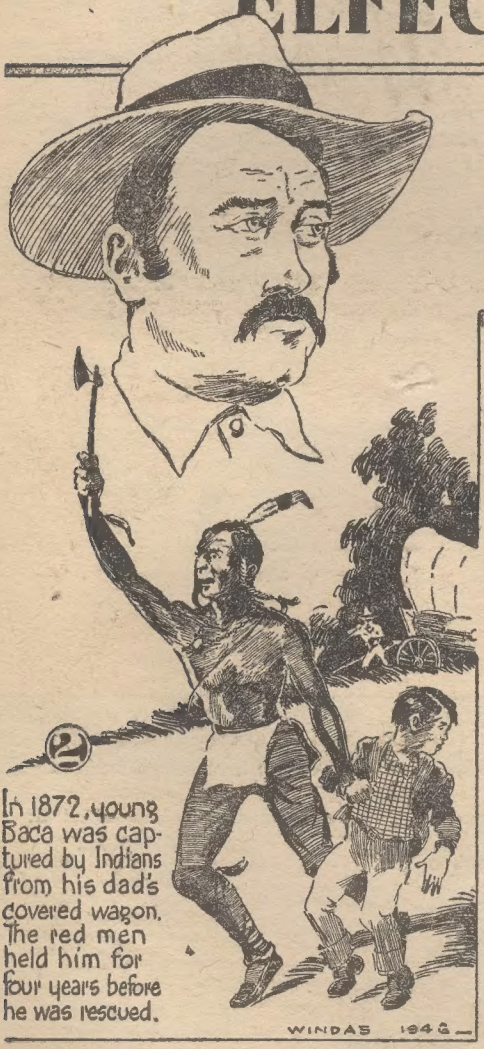

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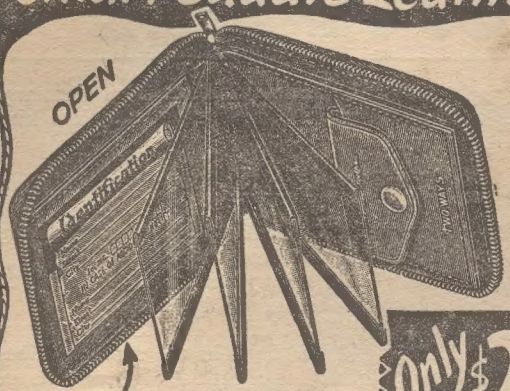

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IN THE SADDLE

OUR FRIEND, the Top Sarge, had been after four and a half years of service, "sprung," as he called it. Back from Germany he looked lean and fit when we ran into him at Joe's Place.

We hadn't seen each other since our days at Texas U together, but Ranny—his real name was Randall Black, and he was a product of the Dakota Black Hills country—looked about the same as ever, except for a kind of vague look that stole into his sun-parched blue eyes whenever he thought of the gang who wouldn't be back.

Over some beers, we lost no time in getting into one of those "whatever became of Joe Whoozis" discussions. That led, inevitably, to the name of Long Bill Stanley. Both of us had known Long Bill at school, a tall, gangling, slow-spoken native-born Texan, with sandy hair, grave, smoke-gray eyes, and a kind of shy, apologetic grin which lighted up his agreeably homely face like a ray of sun.

Long Bill had never talked much about himself, but he used to yarn a bit about his granddaddy, Texas Jack Stanley, one-time Ranger.

Texas Jack's last job for the Rangers was one that will be long remembered in the proud annals of that famous organization. Texas Jack had been sent out after a renegade named Boothill Barney, a boot-tough rustler and bandit with a four-figure price on his elusive head. Texas Jack trailed Boothill for weeks, finally catching up with him in the Red River country, where the outlaw was holed up in a lonely line shack.

Approaching the apparently deserted cabin warily, Texas Jack was within ten yards of the door when glass smashed from one of the front windows and the ugly snout of a Winchester speared through.

"That's fur enough," warned a flat voice from inside. "Git back on yore flybait an' git!"

"Not till you come out of there, Boothill," said Texas Jack, and started forward again. The Winchester cracked flatly, and Texas Jack rocked back on his high heels, hit. But he didn't stop. He emptied his big .45 as he started forward again, kicking open the door of the shack and stumbling inside. Boothill lay on the dirt floor, groaning, blood seeping from an ugly hole in his right side.

Five days later, two gaunt, emaciated men rode up before Ranger Headquarters in El Paso, and disappeared inside. Texas Jack Stanley went up to the desk of the lieutenant in charge, handcuffed to his prisoner.

"Chief, here's Boothill Barney," he announced thickly. "He's—" Then he collapsed, dragging Boothill to the floor with him. Two days later, he died.

When we got to asking Ranny about Long Bill he didn't seem too anxious to talk.

"Look," said Ranny finally, "I don't like to talk about this too much, but. . . ."

The story didn't take long to tell. Ranny and Long Bill had been in the same overseas Infantry outfit. One night the officer in charge of their company called for volunteers. Two men were needed, for an especially hazardous scouting trip behind the German lines. If possible, prisoners were to be brought back. Ranny Black and Cpl. Bill Stanley volunteered.

They were spotted in the dark by a Nazi machine gunner, who opened up on them without warning. Long Bill got it in the chest. But that didn't stop him. "Stay back and cover me," he whispered to Ranny. "I'm goin' in. . . . ." And before Ranny could stop him, he was crawling on his belly towards the machine gun nest. Almost there, he tossed his grenade, then leaped up and hurtled forward into the hole where, just seconds before, the machine gun had been spraying leaden death. He found three Germans dead, another alive, cowering in a dim corner of the dugout.

Long Bill herded his prisoner out of the dugout, but on the way back lost his way in the dark and became separated from Ranny. It wasn't until dawn was breaking that a bedraggled and white-faced Infantry Corporal, pushing a frightened-looking Nazi before him, found the American lines and called out the password to the posted sentry. Fifteen minutes later, he was before the Company commander with his prisoner, who, in frightened, guttural bursts of speech, divulged the vital information which enabled the Infantry outfit to overrun the enemy's position.

"Good old Long Bill," we murmured, after Ranny had finished. "Had the same fighting guts as his old granddaddy, didn't he?"

"Sure did," Ranny spoke brusquely. "Let's get out of here," he said abruptly.

Then Ranny told us. Long Bill Stanley had been awarded the Silver Star—posthumously.

We went out into the night. Overhead, the stars were brilliant as diamonds in a velvet sky. And as we walked away, we thought of those same stars shining over a lonely white cross in France, and over another hero's grave, down on the Red River. . . .

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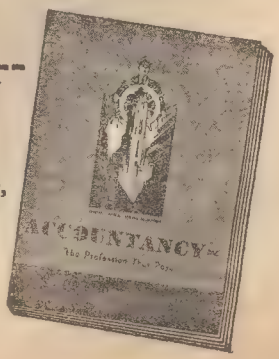

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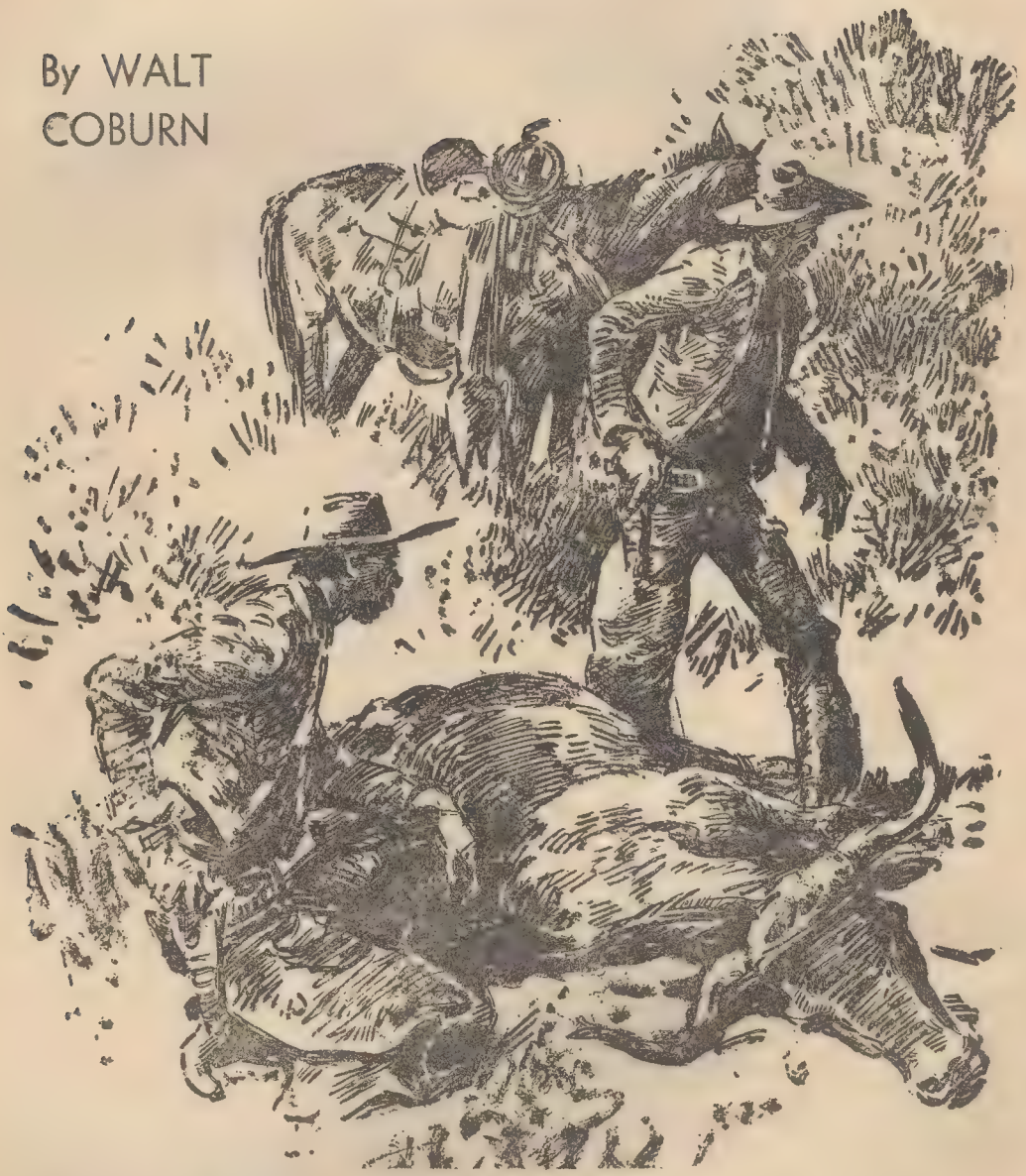
A NEW BOSS FOR

By WALT COBURN



Because of its sinister, bloodstained history, nobody on earth—or so Jud Burkaw and Sam Butcher figured—would have been loco enough to live at Haunted Cabin Ranch. . . . But the big, red-cheeked Britisher seemed to think buying a spook spread would be jolly good fun—until murderous ha'ants began their deadly vigil, by the light of smashing gunflame!

BUSHWHACK RANCH

"Give-A-Damn Jones is behind this," snarled Jed Burkaw.

Powerful Novel of a Lone-Wolf Fighter

CHAPTER ONE

Ghost Ranch for Sale

SAM BUTCHER complained that rustling cattle from the big Britisher at Haunted Cabin Ranch was like drinking stale beer. There was no kick to it. Jed Burkaw said Sam Butcher was the brush-popper who had ought to know, since Butcher spent most of his time branding mavericks on the Britisher's range on the west slope of the Paisano Peaks. Jed Burkaw spoke without any bitterness, nor had he cause to complain of Butcher's long rope and hot running iron. For Jed Burkaw and Sam Butcher were pardners and shared alike on everything that wore their Two Pole Punkin brand.

Burkaw and Butcher had sold the Haunted Cabin and the Hat brand to the big, blond, blue-eyed Britisher whose name was Norman Farnsworth, and had thrown in the evil reputation of the place for boot. Or, to be more exact, the big pilgrim had bought the Haunted Cabin Ranch because of its sinister, blood-spattered history.

"Ruddy name for a country place," he'd said, when he had first heard of the Haunted Cabin Ranch. He had just come to Arizona then. "Any sort of legend to back it up?"

"Plenty," the saloonman at the little border town of Paisano Peaks told him. "Geronimo and his Injuns camped there when they'd lifted the scalp of the white man who lived there. The Apache Kid hid out there with one or two of his stolen squaws from the White Mountain Reservation. And outlaws like Black Jack Ketchum holed up there and played gun tag with law posses in the Paisano Peaks. There's half a dozen graves scattered around the place. . . . If that's what you mean by legend, mister."

"The name of Haunted Cabin Ranch intrigues me. Can it be purchased for any sum within reason?"

"The Haunted Cabin ranch," the saloon man told the big, beefy pilgrim from the British Isles, "belongs to Jed Burkaw and Sam Butcher. And that pair of pardners will sell anything they own, including one another. I wouldn't know what you'd consider a sum within reason, but they'll hold you up. And you can't buy the ranch without buyin' the Hat brand and what cattle and horses they got or claim they got in that Hat iron. The Hat range runs up the west slope of the Paisano Peaks and their Two Pole Punkin range joins onto it. It's rough country that can't be worked clean by the roundups and they range-brand all the year around, which makes them mountain cattle plenty wild, bein' roped at twelve months outa the year. There's no completed boundary fence between the two ranges, and there's blind gates along every mile of what fence is built. Burkaw and Butcher has sold the Haunted Cabin Ranch half a dozen times, mebby. If the new owner lived that long he was rearin' to sell it back to 'em in a year or so at any kind of a price they had a mind to offer. Spooked out."

"Ghosts?" The big Britisher had smiled, his eyes sky blue, as he lingered over his watered whisky.

"Ghosts," the saloon keeper wiped off the bar and poured himself a shot of booze, "yeah. Gun slingin', night ridin' ghosts! Jed Burkaw and Sam Butcher will fog up my saloon with gun smoke for killin' a sale. But there it is, mister, laid on the line. Now swaller your drink and ketch the next stagecoach for some peaceful town like Tombstone before that pair of blacklegs shows up and sells you that Haunted Cabin outfit. I don't want you on my conscience. Drink up."

The saloon man's name was Jones—Give-a-Damn Jones they called him. He walked with a limp and there was a glass eye in a scarred socket. The false eye was a polished blue. His real eye was reddish brown. He had thinning gray hair and a veined, red face.

There was a whisky whisper to his voice, and when he was perturbed he would press out the artificial eye with his thumb and polish it on his dirty bar towel, then pop it back in its scarred socket. He popped the glass eye out now and wiped it on the bar towel.

The beefy Britisher watched, fascinated. "An uncle of mine had one of those," he remarked. "But old Sir Basil kept it more or less concealed behind a monocle of dark glass. As a lad it intrigued me. . . . Sir Basil's matched."

"I used to pack a tobaccer sack full. All colors. But this was my favor-ite. Had hell breakin' 'er in. . . . Now she fits like an old boot. That stagecoach will be pullin' in and outa here again in about an hour. I'll give you a bottle to take along."

"Ghosts," the big Britisher had shaken his head and smiled like a big overgrown schoolboy, "have always fascinated me. No castle worth the mention in England is without at least one ghost. I'd like to arrange an appointment with the gentlemen you mentioned. I won't be too confused by the cattle and the bally Hat brand. I came West to become a cattleman. And if you'd care to act as my agent in negotiating the deal, I'll pay you the customary commission and all that. You have an honest eye."

GIVE-A-DAMN JONES did not often choke on his own corn likker. When he had gotten his breath and popped out the glass eye and was polishing it again, the big six-footer named Norman Farnsworth pointed at it with the stem of his briar pipe.

"The eye," he chuckled, "to which I had reference."

Give-a-Damn Jones said the drinks were on the house, then groaned as two riders reined up at the hitchrack.

"That's Jed Burkaw, the short, heavy-set 'un that looks like he's part Injun," said the saloon keeper. "The big 'un with the hawk beak and green eyes and dirty gray hair is Sam Butcher. I wish to hell you'd ketch that stage outa here, Pilgrim. I don't want your ghost a-hauntin' me. Don't git ketched in their bear trap, mister, is my advice."

"You're my agent, Jones, old warrior. And to relieve your ingrown conscience I hereby absolve you from all blame of larceny, mayhem, and so forth and so on. I give you my bally word not to return a-hauntin'. And so far as I am concerned, your slumbers shall remain serene. Cherrio!" Norman Farnsworth, remittance man and younger son of the Farnsworth name, lifted his glass of watered whisky and drank.

It was by far the easiest deal Jed Burkaw and his pardner Sam Butcher had ever made, and they had peddled the Haunted Cabin Ranch so many times it was shopworn.

But for the first time in the memory of the border cow town of Paisano Peaks, Give-a-

Damn Jones had flatly refused to take a dollar of commission from either side for his share in handling the deal.

"I can't do it, Pilgrim," he told Norman Farnsworth. "Every time I look at you I wonder why you ain't wearin' short pants and suckin' striped stick candy instead of a pipe. I wish the hell you'd back outa the deal."

"Don't carry on like the ruddy red hen that thought the sky was falling! Is it gout causin' the limp, old chap?"

"Bullet. You still got time to ketch the next stage. Leave 'em holdin' the sack—"

"Sir Basil," said Norman Farnsworth, "was annoyed by the gout in his later years. But he absolutely refused to give up his Port. And rare roast beef. . . . What ails the Burkaw chap's stomach? Squeamish, what? Otherwise a rugged character."

"Rugged," Give-a-Damn Jones said, "ain't the word I had in mind. I hoped that slippin' my store eye would run him off the deal. . . . Well, it's your funeral, Pilgrim. And I'll hate like hell to go to it."

"Thanks, old crusader, I'll bear it in mind. Speaking of funerals, and it was not I, remember, who brought up the moldy subject, I recall the laying out of the corpse of Sir Basil. There was a bit of to-do over his artificial eye. It was his last request that it be buried with him—left intact in its proper place, you know. Sir Basil had been quite firm about it. The effect was a bit ghastly. Then someone bethought himself of the black monocle, and the day was saved. . . . If you have any such last request in mind, old boy, I'd deem it a pleasure to follow it out."

Give-a-damn Jones shoved out the bar bottle and pitcher of water, a grin on his whisky-veined face. He filled his shot-glass to the brim.

"You kin think of the damndest things, Pilgrim. Who the hell was talkin' about *my* funeral?"

"The subject," smiled the big Britisher, "was brought up generally. Burials happen to all of us. But you haven't committed yourself concerning the ruddy eye."

"Leave 'er in. And I'll do my damndest to slip 'er when Jed Burkaw leans over to spit in my dead face. Drink hearty!"

A strange bond of comradeship had sprung up between the big remittance man and the glass-eyed saloonkeeper. And Give-a-Damn Jones was a man who gave his friendship to mighty few.

"Keep your lousy, stinkin' blood money!" Give-a-damn Jones had told Jed Burkaw and Sam Butcher. "I wouldn't touch a dollar of it with a fifty-seven foot pole."

"Got religion all of a sudden, Jones?" Burkaw sneered.

"Give it ary damn' name you want. Now drink up and git out. And I mean mucho pronto!"

CHAPTER TWO

Pilgrim's Progress

NORMAN FARNSWORTH sat his horse in the shade of an old hackberry tree. The big Britisher sat a horse well. He was patiently "unlearning" the British cavalry seat in the saddle and learning how to ride the double-rigged Texas-made saddle he had cinched on the best horse in his Hat remuda. After a few comical and disastrous attempts he had given up throwing a rope at even a small calf. He'd leave the roping to his Mexican cowhands. Give-a-Damn Jones had promised to send him out a good man to ramrod his Hat outfit. But until his foreman showed up, the Britisher was letting his crew of Mexicans ramrod themselves. If they rode off and out of sight in the morning to laze in the shade all day and return at nightfall for supper, there wasn't much Norman Farnsworth could do about it.

The Haunted Cabin Ranch was at the mouth of a timbered canyon, past which flowed a swift creek called the Paisano River. There were adobe buildings, mesquite corrals and giant hackberry trees for shade. It was wild and untamed country, steeped in grim history. At night the wind moaned down through the canyon and whispered in the tree branches and shadows took on distorted shapes.

Norman Farnsworth spent his nights there alone. None of the Mexicans would be caught there after dark; they stayed at range camps back in the hills or at the lower camp on the river where the country flattened out into a mesquite and cactus-strewn desert.

Daytimes he rode alone, prowling more or less aimlessly and seemingly without special purpose. He liked to ride and explore and perhaps dream. Yet his bright sky-blue eyes were missing nothing. And sometimes he took British army field glasses from their leather case strapped on his saddle and watched Jed Burkaw or Sam Butcher as they roped and branded mavericks on his Hat range. Then there would be a grim set to his blunt jaw, and his eyes would harden.

He was watching them now. Burkaw and Butcher had spooked a little bunch of wild cattle from the brush high up on one side of the canyon. Butcher let out a yipping shout and took after a spotted two-year-old maverick bull.

"One of ourn, Jed!" he yelled as he cocked his loop back across his shoulder.

It was a wild, reckless, breakneck race Butcher matched with the spotted maverick bull, with Burkaw angling down the slope a ways behind. It took cowpuncher skill and

a brave man's daring to rope wild cattle in the rough country.

Norman Farnsworth was a tenderfoot, but he had sense enough to understand and give the cattle rustlers full credit for the life-and-death risk they were taking. And it was more admiration than anger that showed on his clean-shaven, sunburnt face as he watched the cowpuncher team come tearing down the side of the deep wide canyon, kicking up showers of loose dirt and gravel. And then the big spotted bull reached the foot of the slant and was hidden from sight. And within rope's throw at the bull's heels spurred Sam Butcher. He waited until his horse reached level ground and then the loop was flipped off his shoulder and back. It swung once and twice and then shot out and tightened around the bull's horns. Butcher set his horse back and the bull somersaulted at the other end of the taut rope. Then Jed Burkaw rode down the slant and hit the level ground and his loop swung down and picked up both hind legs as the maverick bull scrambled to its four feet. After that Sam Butcher was on the ground and running down his taut rope with his hogging string. A few seconds later the maverick bull was hogtied.

Butcher gathered dry twigs and kindled a little branding fire, and they were burning their Two Pole Punkin on the maverick's spotted hide when Norman Fansworth rode up on them.

"Excitin', what?" The big red faced Britisher ignored the six-shooters in the hands of Burkaw and Butcher. "Really blood stirrin'. I enjoyed watchin' the bally show."

Norman Farnsworth packed neither a saddle carbine nor holstered six-shooter. He looked a little ridiculous in his new chaps that covered whipcord cavalry breeches and cavalry boots. His old corduroy shooting coat served for a brush-jumper. He tilted back his Stetson hat and mopped sweat from his straw-colored hair and sunburned face.

THE two brush-poppers shoved their six-shooters back in their holsters and swapped quick, covert looks. What the hell did this big greenhorn tenderfoot know about the range laws that gave him all unbranded mavericks on his Hat range, provided he was fast enough to rope and brand 'em? Hell, he didn't even pack a gun. . . .

"Glad yuh liked it." Butcher's big yellow teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

"Only it's not cricket." Norman Farnsworth spoke in his best British accent. He was smiling faintly. But the smile did not hide the ice-blue of his eyes.

"Cricket?" Jed Burkaw's heavy brows beetled and his black eyes gleamed wickedly. "What the hell's crickets got to do with it?"

"Cricket is a game, like your American baseball. Sportsmanship is the word—cricket calls for clean sportsmanship. And this," Norman Farnsworth crammed tobacco into his bowl of his briar pipe and pointed its stem at the branded maverick, "is definitely not cricket."

Again Burkaw and Butcher swapped quick, meaning looks. So the big Britisher pilgrim was ketching on at last. Give-a-Damn Jones or somebody had put Farnsworth wise.

Sam Butcher straightened his long back, thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt. He spat a stream of tobacco juice in the fresh Two Pole Punkin brand on the maverick's spotted hide.

"If it ain't cricket," Butcher asked flatly, "what do you aim to call it?"

"A mistake," Norman Farnsworth spoke deliberately, measuring each word as if giving it weighty thought, "*This* time."

"And how about the next time?"

"I'll give it its proper name," smiled the big Britisher. "Cattle rustling."

"And what the hell will you do about it?" growled Jed Burkaw.

"I am given to understand," said Norman Farnsworth, "that the Territory of Arizona has laws covering the subject of cattle rustling, and provides law officers to carry out and enforce such laws. I presume I have clarified my intentions without boring all of us with further details, what?"

"Unjointin' them double-barreled words," grinned Sam Butcher, "I reckon we kin grab the meanin'. . . . I told you he'd holler fer law help, Jed—them damn' dudes is all alike. Only this 'un's a bloody Englisher, and he's mule-headed enough to make us trouble. . . . We might as well settle this now as fu'ther up the crick." Sam Butcher's big knuckled right hand was on the butt of his six-shooter.

"He don't pack a gun, Butcher," growled Jed Burkaw. "Scared he might have to use it."

"That's his hard luck."

"Yeah. But tough to explain off to a judge and jury."

"We'll plant a gun on his carcass. Me'n you is the only eye witness. We taken longer chances than this."

Norman Farnsworth's cold, bright blue eyes watched them, his smile grim.

"You might be wise," he said quietly, "to spend a bit of serious thought on this contemplated murder. I'm quite prepared, you know, for this sort of thing."

"Prepared?"

"Quite."

"Where's your gun, then?"

"In the gun rack at the Haunted Cabin. But I was not referring to that, although I will use more caution in the future. I am

speaking of a certain signed document which I left in proper hands—in the event that I should meet an untimely end. I am firmly convinced that this document, when introduced into a court of law, will hang a pair of rather clumsy would-be murderers named Jed Burkaw and Sam Butcher."

Norman Farnsworth struck a match and cupped it to the bowl of his briar pipe. He was steady-handed. His eyes were clear and bright through the haze of tobacco smoke.

They eyed him with bitter hatred.

"Do you reckon," said Butcher, "that this damned tenderfoot has outfoxed us, Jed?"

"Give-a-Damn Jones is behind this," snarled Jed Burkaw. "Otherwise I'd take a chance on it. Right from the start that glass-eyed polecat has bin in cahoots with the big pilgrim. I never liked it—it was too easy pickins . . . Somebody's a-comin'. Turn that mav'rick loose!"

There were the mingled sounds of shod hoofs and creaking saddle leather as Butcher jerked loose the hogging string and tailed up the spotted maverick that now wore a big Two Pole Punkin on its spotted hide.

A MAN on a sweat-streaked sorrel gelding rode up out of the brush and rocks, coming from the direction of the Haunted Cabin ranch. The freshly branded maverick, maddened by pain and rough usage, charged. The sorrel jumped sideways, dodged, twisted. The bull charged on through the heavy brush, leaving thin strings of slobber clinging to the branches.

The man on the sorrel gelding grinned flatly as the critter's sharp horn grazed his brush-scarred leather chaps. It had been a close call.

He was a man of medium height, with wide, well-muscled shoulders and a thick chest and muscular neck. But his flanks were lean, and his gray-green eyes, looking out from under heavy black brows, were hard and cold as they fixed on Sam Butcher.

"I'd hate to think," said the man on the sweat-streaked sorrel, "that you done that a-purpose." His teeth showed white against his black beard. He had a drawling voice. And his hand was on his six-shooter.

Butcher and his pardner Burkaw eyed the man warily.

The stranger cut Jed Burkaw a hard look. But he spoke to the big Britisher. "I come out," he said, "to ramrod your Hat outfit."

"Righto!" Norman Farnsworth puffed his pipe.

"You got ary notion," asked the new Hat ramrod, "what you'd like done with this

"Easy does it" when you use
The low-priced blade well groomed men choose!
That's Thin Gillette, four for a dime—
It cuts down shaving cost and time!
Made of easy-flexing steel hard enough to cut glass
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

hungry-loop Two Pole Punkin' couple?"

"The estimable Jed? And the worthy Sam? I believe I have clarified my status with them. They may consider themselves at liberty to take their departure. Any further visitations on their part however will be considered trespassing. Good day, gentlemen. I've enjoyed this little chat no end."

Jed Burkaw stood on widespread saddle-muscled legs, his head thrust a little forward, his eyes beady.

"What do you make of this stranger, Sam?" he growled.

"He's almighty high-handed," grunted Sam Butcher," and mebbyso he's runnin' a whizzer on us. But most mebby he's got the guts to back it up with that smokepole he's got his hand on. Anyhow the sign ain't right. We might as well drag it fer home."

"What name you reckon he's travelin' under, Sam?"

"Hard to say. If he'd come out from behind that black brush he's growed, a man might read his brand."

"Law, yuh reckon?"

"I doubt it. Though he might have a badge pinned to his undershirt."

"Them Arizona Rangers don't wear law badges." Big Sam Butcher spat tobacco juice.

"We got ways of findin' out, Sam."

"And it's always better to know," agreed Sam Butcher, "who you're gut shootin'."

"Give-a-Damn Jones will know." Jed's black eyes glittered wickedly.

"Yeah. Give-a-Damn Jones hired 'im." And Sam bared yellow teeth.

The man on the sorrel grinned flatly. "Fetch along your interpreter some time," he said, "and we'll auger. Meanwhile, you heard what the Boss said. Drag it."

"We know what you're called behind your back, mister," said Jed Burkaw, "but what name you travelin' under while you're ramroddin' the Hat spread?"

"Magruder." The man's gray-green eyes narrowed a little. "Bill Magruder."

"And we're the James Boys," sneered Sam Butcher, "Jesse and Frank."

With that, they got on their horses and rode away. And once out of sight, they spurred to a high trot.

CHAPTER THREE

Symbol of Disgrace

NORMAN FARNSWORTH scraped the bowl of his pipe with a knife blade and tamped in fresh tobacco with his forefinger. He and his new ramrod rode side by side along the wide trail to the Haunted Cabin Ranch.

"I say," he smiled, "the very mention of that name Bill Magruder put their wind up, what?"

Magruder's grin crinkled his gray-green eyes to slits. "Kinda ketched 'em with their guard down."

"In India," smiled Norman Farnsworth, "my uncle, Sir Basil, was a Colonel. Cavalry. Regular martinet. Wore white gloves when he marched down the line on inspection arms. Might examine every ruddy carbine in the regiment. Expected the white gloves to remain spotless when he was done. . . . They called him Old Stinker. . . .

"Inspected guard one night before they rode into Khyser Pass. Black as a hat. Sentry halted him. Night charged with danger and all that rot.

" 'Who's there?' barked the sentry.

" 'Old Stinker!' snapped Sir Basil.

"From then on those chaps would have followed him through the hot blasts of Hell. And some of 'em near did. As the Immortal Will puts it, 'What's in a name?' "

Bill Magruder *was* a name to conjure with in the West. Magruder was a notorious outlaw; the price on his head, dead or alive, ran into five figures. He was head of the Robbers Roost Gang, but the gang had scattered more than a year ago and Bill Magruder was reported to be in South America.

There was a grin on Magruder's black bearded face. "Give-a-Damn Jones," he said, "was tellin' me about your Uncle Basil."

"Splendid chap," smiled Farnsworth. "Give-a-Damn Jones."

"I've heard him called worse."

"Quite. First time he let the jolly eye slip its moorings, I got a bit of a shock, you know."

"He wasn't runnin' no saloon when he lost that eye," said Bill Magruder bluntly. "Was a time when Give-a-Damn Jones was quite a man. . . . For a long time he wore a patch." Bill Magruder chucked softly.

"We rode into town," he reminisced, "to take on a little bank job. Next door to the bank was a jewelry store. As we stepped off our horses Give-a-Damn spotted a plush tray fitted with glass eyes. Well sir, damned if he don't make us wait there on the sidewalk while he goes into that store. Didn't have a dollar in his pocket, so he throwed down on the store man and told him to hand over that tray of glass eyes; said he'd send him the damages. And he did. We rode back to Robbers Roost and mister, it was actually somethin' to watch Give-a-Damn tryin' out them glass orbs. Every time you'd turn around he was wearin' a different colored eye. He packed 'em in an old buckskin tobacco sack. . . . Bullet hit the sack the time he got shot up so bad we left him for dead. All he had left was that one blue eye he was wearin'

that day we done the job on the Cheyenne bank. And they said all he hollered about while the doctors was patchin' him up was that some dirty so-and-so had plumb ruined that sack of glass eyes. . . .

"Give-a-Damn Jones wouldn't let me'n the boys take him outa that henhouse jail. Said he was weary from dodgin' lead. The best we could do was buy him a pardon and set him up in the saloon business. And today he's still wearin' that same blue eye. For good luck, he says." Bill Magruder was looking over the big Britisher as they rode along.

"Ain't many men, mister, that Give-a-Damn Jones will tie to. But I kin see what he meant when he sent for me. He said you'd do to take along."

Norman Farnsworth's blue eyes brightened. "Stout fella, Give-a-Damn Jones. And don't think I'm ungrateful and all that. But there's a matter of honor involved in this, and I hope Give-a-Damn will forgive me for not taking him completely into my confidence. I must also keep you out in the dark. I know this sounds like a lot of damned drivel, but I've got to go it alone. Does it sound stuffy?"

Bill Magruder shook his head. His eyes kept studying the big Britisher as they rode along. He started to say something, then decided against it. And so they rode on to the Haunted Cabin Ranch in silence.

"I'll borrow a fresh horse," said Bill Magruder, "and hit the trail."

"Not till after supper, old man."

Norman Farnsworth got out a bottle of good whisky, and the way he went about getting supper revealed the fact that he was no novice at camp cooking. Magruder stared at the British cavalry carbine and the Webley pistol in its army holster—guns that had seen hard service.

"India." Farnsworth smiled. "But it wasn't quite my dish of tea. Policin' the blighters. Dress for dinner. Drinkin' too much. Gruesome bore. So I chucked it when a chance popped up."

Bill Magruder looked around like a man who had been here before and was looking at once familiar walls. And again he checked back something he was about to say.

"Don't go anywheres," he finally said, "without a gun—not even to the barn. Burkaw and Butcher play for keeps."

Norman Farnsworth nodded. He walked over to the old shooting coat he had taken off when they came into the house and lifted a short-barreled, heavy calibered revolver from one of its spacious pockets. He smiled as he shoved it into the pocket of his whipcord riding breeches.

A slow grin spread across Bill Magruder's black whiskered face. "Then you was heeled when you rode up on Burkaw and Butcher."

"I thought it advisable to go armed, but I saw no need of divulging the fact to them. Instead, I let them labor under the delusion that they were about to murder an unarmed Pilgrim—fed them what you chaps call, I believe, a swizzer."

"Whizzer."

"Whizzer. Had the bloody beggars guessin'. I was not quite ready, you see, for the bally showdown."

THE coffee was strong and black, the grub well cooked. Farnsworth had insisted on getting the supper unaided but he let the black-whiskered outlaw wash the dishes. And it was while they smoked their after-supper tobacco that Bill Magruder broke a lengthy silence.

"I'll ride away from here before dark, while there's still plenty of light for any Two Pole Punkin man to sight me. But I'll slip back after dark—and I won't be too far away. You can't play an open game against bushwhackers like Burkaw and Butcher. When they spring their gun trap, you won't stand a snowball's chance in Hell. Give-a-Damn Jones knowed that or he wouldn't have sent for me. There's no special need for you to git yourself killed, is there? I mean to clear up that matter of honor?"

Norman Farnsworth knocked the ashes from his pipe. The sparkle had gone from his blue eyes and there was a grim set to his jaw. And for the first time Bill Magruder saw the streaks of silver in the straw-colored hair around the rancher's temples. The big Britisher strode into the bedroom beyond. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked a battered old portmanteau. When he came back into the room where the black-whiskered outlaw straddled a chair, the Englishman was carrying a scarlet coat over his arm—the bright red uniform tunic of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Constabulary. But where the brass buttons had been there remained only jagged little rips.

Norman Farnsworth's ruddy face had a gray look as he held the mutilated red coat in both big hands.

"When a member of the Northwest Mounted is tried and convicted of cowardice," he spoke in a toneless voice, "he stands at attention before the rest of his outfit. The charge of cowardice is read aloud. Then the Chief Inspector rips off his tunic buttons—one by one. It's like tearing chunks out of a man's heart. . . ."

Bill Magruder did not speak, did not move. He waited for the big Britisher to get hold of himself.

"I can see no hope," said Norman Farnsworth, "of clearing the black stain of cowardice from the name of Constable Norman

Farnsworth of the Northwest Mounted. . . . But by the eternal hell, I can kill the two blackguards who were the cause of that disgrace!"

"Amen to that, mister."

Bill Magruder got slowly to his feet. Farnsworth carried the mutilated scarlet tunic into the bedroom, folded it neatly, and put it back in the old leather trunk.

"It has been a long, long trail." Norman Farnsworth spoke quietly now. "This is its end—here on the Mexican border at Haunted Cabin Ranch. And without my goin' into the sordid details, you are man enough to understand why I must do this job alone."

Magruder nodded and picked up his hat. "The job's all yourn, fella. But if you lose, I'll play your hand out. So long."

Norman Farnsworth walked with Bill Magruder to the barn and gave him the best horse in the Hat remuda. Then he watched him ride away into the sunset. And when the outlaw was no longer in sight the big Britisher walked slowly back to the low-roofed adobe house.

He filled his briar pipe and lit it and sat outside smoking and watching the sun go down behind the ragged skyline of Paisano Peaks. His eyes were bleak.

It was getting dark when he went inside. Before he lit a light he pulled the blinds low and shut the door. Then he opened the old leather portmanteau and from under the scarlet coat he took out a flat booklike case of Moroccan leather. Opened, it showed the portrait of a young woman, painted on ivory. The portrait was of a girl with dark coppery hair and dark gray eyes and a smile that, though barely there, had a wealth of warmth even as the artist had, with true genius, portrayed in the depths of her eyes a woman's deep love and understanding.

On the opposite side was a sheet of thick parchment and on it was written: "God protect you, until you come back to me. Elizabeth."

The man studied it there in the candlelight for a long time before he put it back, sighing, into the leather trunk with the mutilated scarlet tunic.

CHAPTER FOUR

"A Matter of Honor"

SAM BUTCHER and Jed Burkaw sat in their cabin at the Two Pole Punkin ranch drinking from a jug in the lamplight while they waited for the late moonrise. Both of them were on edge and the rotgut booze was burning in their bellies. The windowpanes of the cabin were daubed over with black paint and blanketed. The door was shut.

Now the door opened suddenly and the black-whiskered outlaw Bill Magruder stood framed in the doorway with the black night at his back. The six-shooter in his hand covered both Burkaw and Butcher.

"Take it easy," said Bill Magruder, "and nobody will git hurt. But if either of you gents make a wrong move I'll kill you both. I dropped around for a medicine talk." He stepped inside and kicked the door shut.

"You sellin' out the big Johnny Bull Pilgrim?" leered Sam Butcher.

"No."

"Declarin' war, mebby?" growled Jed Burkaw.

"No."

"Then what the hell—?"

"You got a pen and a bottle of ink and some paper," said Bill Magruder quietly. "You're goin' to write down the story about how you made a monkey out of a young baldfaced Mountie up in Cypress Hills when he was sent out to arrest the pair of you for peddlin' likker to the Cree and Sarcee Injuns. That'd be fifteen years ago. . . . Take it easy, I told yuh!"

Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw had stiffened in their chairs. Butcher's lantern-jawed face paled to a muddy yellow. Burkaw's beady black eyes glittered in the lamplight.

"You're talkin' to the wrong fellers, mister," said Butcher.

"We never heard of the Cypress Hills," growled Burkaw. "Never was that far north. That near Canada?"

"It's where you was born, Burkaw, yes. Your mother was a Cree squaw, and your old man was shot on a horse thief raid. Burk Jedson, they called you. Don't waste your wind lyin' to me."

"That's fifteen years ago," said Burkaw. "I got no call to recollet that far back."

"Butch Sampson turned his name around into Sam Butcher," Bill Magruder went on quietly, "and when the pair of you got run outa Canada. . . ." He paused. "Want me to keep on turnin' over your cards?"

"You know a hell of a lot," said Butcher. "Who talked to you, mister?"

"If I shaved off my whiskers," said Bill Magruder, "and shed fifteen years off my hide, you might remember me. I was ridin' the rough string for the 76 outfit in the Cypress Hills when you two gents stopped off for supper one night. You was both half drunk and braggin' how you'd led some young greenhorn Mountie a wild chase and set him afoot."

"I told you, Jed, I'd know him if he came out from behind that black brush on his face! It's Kid Magruder, the 76 bronc peeler. . . . Keep on turnin' over the cards, Magruder. But I don't see the use of it. That back-

trail of yourn is marked with snake tracks, too, remember?"

"Not the kind of sign you two skunks left behind. How'd you trap the greenhorn Mountie?"

"He rode up on us at a Cree camp." Butcher took a big drink from the jug on the table. "A Mountie ain't allowed, accordin' to their fool rulin', to shoot first. So he never pulled a gun—just read off the warrants for our arrest and told us to shed our guns and git on our horses and come along.

"I give Jed the wink and we throwed away our guns and surrendered peaceful. He never had sense enough to look us over fer the sneak guns we always packed. We rode away, and then when the sign was right we throwed down on him. When he clawed fer his gun, I bent the barrel of my six-shooter acrost his skull. And that is all there was to it. Just a big josh. . . . Ain't that right, Jed?"

"That's right, Sam, Just a josh. We rode on to the 76 ranch."

"Where you stole two horses out of the 76 barn sometime durin' the night," continued Bill Magruder. "And then you never pulled up till you was hid out safe in the Montana badlands."

"We *borrowed* them 76 horses," said Butcher. "I don't suppose you ever changed horses thataway along the Outlaw Trail, Magruder?"

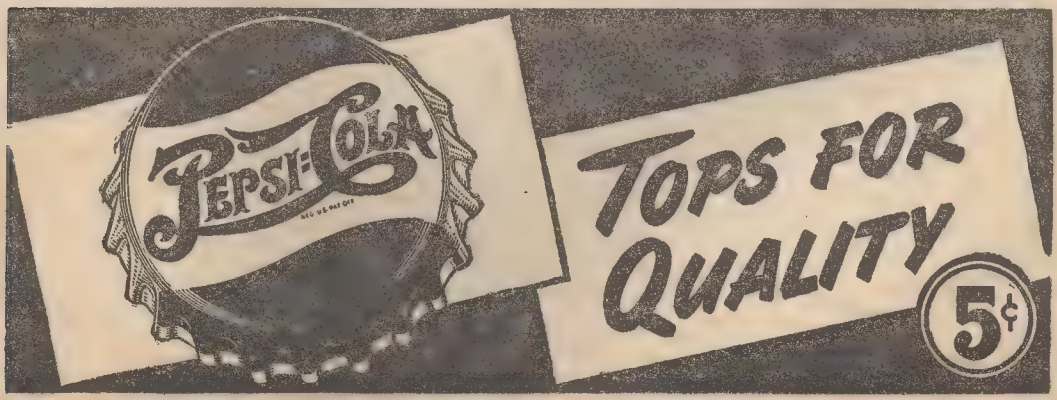
"We could uncover snake tracks along your back trail, Magruder," growled Jed Burkaw.

"Not the kind of sign you two polecats tried to cover. Whiskey peddlin' was just a side line. That young greenhorn Mountie was handed the whiskey peddlin' warrants and told to fetch you for that—he wasn't told anything about how you two gents had murdered nearly half a dozen free trappers durin' the past five-six years and sold their fur pelts to the Fur Trading company at Fort Benton. Free trappers bein' unpopular in Canada, where the Hudson's Bay Company had control of the trade, them murders went unnoticed for a long time. And it mighta gone on longer, only Butch Sampson's Cree squaw got religion and talked too much. And then Burk Jedson got scared his Cree woman might do likewise, so you had to kill both them Cree squaws. And them Crees was about to take the law into their own hands and lift a couple of squawmen scalps when that young Mountie rode up and saved your bacon. And Jed, here, who talked the Cree lingo, told the Crees the Mountie was arrestin' him and his pardner Butch for killin' their squaw wives and the Crees was satisfied to let the Mountie ride off with his two prisoners. . . . And plumb outa gratitude for his savin' your scalps, you two renegades knocked that greenhorn Mountie on the head and left him for dead in the Cypress Hills. We got the whole story later at the 76 ranch. And that's the story you are goin' to put down with pen and ink on paper. . . . Or would you rather let me gut-shoot the pair of you where you set?"

"What good will it do you, Magruder?" snarled Sam Butcher.

"Me? Not a damn bit of good. I'm doin' it fer a favor to a white man. Now git at it before I git quick-triggered. And then I'll ride away and you two jokers kin ride on down to the Haunted Cabin Ranch and spook Farnsworth off from his outfit. Only I got a notion that big Pilgrim will make bunch-quitters outa you two spooky sidewinders. Now git it wrote down without a lie and don't leave out nothin'. . . . Git at it!"

BILL MAGRUDER straddled a chair, his six-shooter covering them, while they took turns writing what he told them to put down. And neither of the pair had the fighting guts to make a gun play. When they both had signed it and he had made them read it aloud, he took the folded sheets of paper and shoved them into an envelope and sealed it and put it in his chaps pocket. Then Bill Magruder backed out the door.



The night swallowed him as he mounted his horse and rode away, just as the late moon was pushing its way above the broken line of the Paisano Peaks.

Bill Magruder headed for town, his heart heavy. Tonight had stirred up old memories and those memories were poisoned with dull regret and a sort of sadness. And he wondered what he would do with his past years if he could start again from fifteen years ago when he had been a restless, reckless, cowpunching kid of twenty. Gentle and patient with a green bronc, but hot-tempered and too quick-triggered in an argument with men. He had shot and killed a man because that man had abused a big gelding Bill Magruder had turned over from his rough string. And he had ridden away from the 76 round-up down into the Montana badlands along the Missouri River. And from there on down into the Hole in the Wall, where he had turned outlaw and thrown in with Give-a-Damn Jones.

Give-a-Damn Jones had gotten a bellyfull of it and paid off his debt to society by a stretch in the pen. Bill Magruder and his hand-picked cowpuncher outlaw gang had held up a train to get the money to buy Give-a-Damn Jones a pardon out of prison. Two of the gang had been killed, and Bill Magruder had been obliged to jump the border into Mexico and lay low. There he changed his name and made a few dollars handling wet cattle out of Chuhuahua across the Rio Grande into Texas. But he had kept in touch with Give-a-Damn Jones and finally had made it to Give-a-Damn's saloon.

"Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw," Give-a-Damn Jones had told Bill Magruder, "is sittin' on the lid. Mebby they know it, and mebby they don't. Anyways, they're too wise to make the mistake of diggin' holes all over the place. They never let on they suspected there might be a big cache. Not them. They're waitin' for Bill Magruder to come back and lift it. Meanwhile, they keep a close watch on me. Though neither of 'em, drunk or sober, has ever tried to crowd talk outa me.

"They got a game they play. They sell the Haunted Cabin Ranch to anybody that's fool enough to lay the money on the barrel head. Mebbyso they figger you sent the feller to buy the place, so he kin lift the cache or ride close-herd on it till you come back fer it. And they haunt the damned place day and night fer all the world like a pair of spooks. Men have bin killed there. Me'n you made a stand there when I got this eye shot out. If men that die with their boots on come back to haunt a place, then the Haunted Cabin sure has got its crew of spooks.

"Burkaw and Butcher make the buyer pay good money for the Hat brand," went on Give-a-Damn, "and they'll tally over a sizeable herd in the Hat iron. Then they go to work and work the Hat into their Two Pole Punkin iron. And the Hat round-up won't gather a tenth of the cattle they seen there a few months back. Them cattle is wearin' the Two Pole Punkin. If the feller hollers he's bin robbed, they run him off. If he ain't spooky enough to run, they bushwhack him. Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw has made a good thing outa that old outlaw hideout they call the Haunted Cabin Ranch. . . . Which fetches me to why I sent you word that the sign looked right."

Give-a-Damn grinned. "There's a big tenderfoot Britisher bought the Haunted Cabin Ranch. He talks a lot of Johnny Bull lingo that sounds silly as hell till you git the notion that Norman Farnsworth ain't the big tenderfoot fool he let you think he is. He's got that look in his eyes. He paid ten times what the outfit was worth and never batted an eye. When I told him how bad he was bein' robbed he jest grinned and said I had an honest eye—meanin' my glass eye.

"Norman Farnsworth is a big Britisher pilgrim, Bill. But he's not the damnfool Burkaw and Butcher claim he is. And he's got guts."

"Farnsworth? You say his name is Norman Farnsworth?" Bill Magruder had scowled thoughtfully across the bar. "I've heard that name, somewhere. A long time ago. It'll come to me. He couldn't be a range detective?"

"You better ride out, Bill, and look him over. I told him I'd hire him a good man to ramrod his Hat outfit. And you'll git a look at Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw. If you want me along. . . ."

"You tend your saloon. I'll drift to town of a night and fetch you the news."

GIVE-A-DAMN JONES was behind the bar and the saloon empty when Bill Magruder walked in about midnight. He tossed a thick envelope across the bar and reached for the whiskey bottle like a man who needed a drink. His gray eyes were clouded under knitted black brows.

"Put that in your safe." He did not wait for the one-eyed saloonkeeper to join him but gulped down his drink and immediately splashed more whiskey into the empty glass.

"What's gone wrong, Bill?"

"Nothin'—yet. . . . Remember back in the old days? When the excitement wore off and we cussed the bad luck that had sent us down the Outlaw Trail? Neither of us give up much for the outlaw life—jest a forty-a-month job punchin' cows. We had no kind of a name to disgrace—no purty red coat with brass buttons to be ripped off while our outfit stood

there a-watchin', some with pity and others hidin' grins. . . ."

"What in the name of hell," Give-a-Damn Jones slid out his glass eye and polished it with his bar towel," are you talkin' about?"

"Constable Norman Farnsworth of the Northwest Mounted Police—a big, tow-headed sunburnt kid in a red coat that used to stop at the 76 Ranch in the Cypress Hills fer a bait of grub. . . . The stupid sons ripped the polished brass buttons off his purty red coat. . . . Now he's got to tackle it lone-handed against that pair of bushwhackin' curly wolves that never knew what it was to give a man a fightin' chance for his taw. . . . And now I've got to stay here and git drunk and let 'em murder that big prideful Johnny Bull. Because he calls it a 'matter of honor.' But by God, the devil in Hell will show Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw more mercy than they'll git from Bill Magruder if they murder that Pilgrim Farnsworth!"

Give-a-Damn Jones put the bulky envelope in his safe and poured himself a drink.

"If Farnsworth don't live to come after that envelope," said Bill Magruder, "I want you to send it to the head boss of the Northwest Mounted Police. It cleans the slate of Constable Norman Farnsworth." He downed his drink and smashed the glass and reached for the bottle and drank from its neck.

Give-a-Damn Jones shivered. He hated to see Bill Magruder drink whiskey.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thunder of Doom

AT THE Two Pole Punkin ranch Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw glared into each other's bloodshot eyes. Hate glittered there, and fear. But it was a kind of hatred that bound them closer than the ties of blood brotherhood. And fear of one another stayed their gun hands. So, following the long habit of years, they vented their spleen and bile in cursing each other for all the foul fighting names in their renegade book.

But all their cursing could not kill the outlaw Bill Magruder, whom they had let ride away without pulling a gun. Not that they wanted to kill him. Magruder was the only human being on earth who knew where he had cached the proceeds of fifteen strenuous years of robbing banks and holding up trains. Let Magruder live, then, but keep a close watch on the Haunted Cabin ranch where the outlaw was supposed to have hidden his big cache. And when Bill Magruder dug it up for them, then would be the time to shoot him where his suspenders crossed.

"We done right," decided Butcher and Burkaw, "lettin' him ride. He'll lead us to it."

But Magruder had taken with him a signed confession that would hang Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw. And all the money in the world would do the pair no good if they were strung up from a cottonwood.

"The gall of the son!" snarled Sam Butcher. "Back-trackin' us thataway. What's it buy him?"

"Gives him a tail-holt," growled Jed Burkaw.

"Bill Magruder don't need no tail-holt on a man. . . . T'ain't like Magruder to give a damn how many 'breed trappers we shoved under the snow. Or how we shut the blabbin' mouths of a couple of drunk squaws."

"A outlaw like Bill Magruder," agreed Jed Burkaw, "has all he kin do to tend to his own job of stayin' ten jumps ahead of the law. What me'n you or any other man on the dodge has done back yonder shouldn't make no never-minds to a feller like Magruder. So what the hell's he want with that signed confession?"

Sam Butcher took another drink. A thought struck him as he was swallowing the raw booze and he choked suddenly. When he had taken another drink to stop his coughing, there was a cunning glitter in his bloodshot green eyes.

"I knowed I'd seen that big red-muzzled Johnny Bull somewheres!" he exploded.

"Yeah? Like you knowed that 76 bronc rider was Bill Magruder—after he told yuh? You're drunk, Butcher!"

"And I'm gonna git drunker. Magruder declared hisself when he said he'd come to ramrod that Hat outfit. What's there to ramrod? A scatterment of mountain cattle. A two-bit greasy sack spread with half a dozen flea-bit Mexican hands. And half a million dollars hid at the Haunted Cabin ranch. That Mountie we jobbed in the Cypress Hills was tow-headed, sunburnt, an' blue-eyed. Same as this English dude!"

"That Mountie was dead. You better quit hittin' the rotgut, Butcher. You're seein' Mounties like they was pink elephants instead'a' red coats. . . ."

Sam Butcher was up on his long legs. He tilted the jug and gulped the raw whiskey thirstily. There was a glassy look in his eyes.

"We got to kill that Farnsworth son, and we got to kill him tonight!"

"We done had that made a'ready, Butcher. Gimme a swaller while there's a splash left in the jug. It's Bill Magruder that is goin' to take a lot of killin'. He's come back to lift his cache at Haunted Cabin. And tonight is right fer it."

Outside there sounded the ominous roll of distant thunder. The flare of heat lightning filled their dirty boar's nest of a cabin. A storm was piling up over the Paisano Peaks.

It was, as Butcher said, it was a good night for killing. . . . There was only a few drinks left in the jug and they cursed and snarled over it like two savage dogs fightin' for a bone. And when the jug was empty Sam Butcher sent it crashing against the adobe wall.

Then they got their horses and rode down the mountain and when the flare of heat lightning turned the black night into glaring white light it showed their faces—grim, murder and greed glinting in their hard eyes, warping their brains and firing their blood.

The crash of thunder was like the crack of Doom.

CHAPTER SIX

Farnsworth, of the Mounted!

NORMAN FARNSWORTH prepared himself for what was to come. He bathed. He stropped his razor and lathered his face and shaved as painstakingly as he would for a full-dress inspection. And he laid out the uniform he had worn when he had been Constable Norman Farnsworth of the Northwest Mounted—the polished black boots, the black pants with the yellow stripe down the outer seam, the crimson tunic with the ugly tears where the polished brass buttons had been ripped away. . . .

Fifteen years had changed him from a tall, slim, long-boned youth into a big rawboned man of thicker girth. He was sweating a little by the time he had somehow squeezed his bulk into the uniform. The black pants were skin tight, the tunic much too tight through the shoulder seams. He could not possibly have buttoned the red coat, even if the buttons had been there. He belted on his gun and took his carbine from the gun rack. Then he stood there in the flickering candle light—Constable Norman Farnsworth of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Constabulary, cleanshaven, unafraid, ready.

Every night since he had been living here at the Haunted Cabin Ranch the darkness outside had been disturbed by the stealthy sounds made by men who prowled the night like wolves. And from his darkened windows the big Britisher had caught brief glimpses of moving black shadows, the low mutter of voices. There were no ghosts at Haunted Cabin ranch. But Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw had prowled every night like a pair of wolves. And Farnsworth knew that if he had opened the door and stepped outside they would have shot him down in his tracks, without warning. Not because they suspected he was the Mountie they had left for dead in the Cypress Hills, but because it was a gruesome game they played on men to whom they sold the Haunted Cabin ranch. And always they had managed to cover up their murders. Here in the Territory of Arizona men lived by their guns. And only the hardy ones survived.

Norman Farnsworth waited, and needed no whisky to bolster his courage. As a beardless young subaltern, Norman Farnsworth had faced down death in India many times. And as Constable Farnsworth he had ridden alone into a hostile Cree camp to arrest two squawmen, and had not been afraid. Nor was it the sweat of fear that beaded his clean shaved face now. It was the oppressive heat calm before the storm.

Sheet lightning flared, and thunder rolled and crashed. Outside in the black night a horse nickered. Instantly Farnsworth blew out the flickering flame of the candle and moved in darkness to the door. He swung it open and stepped outside and into the night.

The darkness closed in on him, so thick he could almost feel it. Then the sheet lightning flared and for a brief moment the white glare showed Constable Farnsworth of the Mounted, the naked blued steel of the saddle carbine gripped in his hands. Constable Farnsworth of the Silent Force—standing like a statue of grim retribution, like a ghost. . . . Then the white flare was gone and the night was blacker than before.

Out of that blackness came the hoarse scream of a man—the voice of Jed Burkaw, alias Burk Jedson, half-breed Cree.

Sam Butcher's snarling laugh followed it, mocking his pardner, taunting him.

"You superstitious breed son!" jeered Butcher.

Their two guns crashed at the same moment, but a split-second too late. Their shots were wild because the glimpse of the red-coated Mountie had shocked them and spoiled their aim.

Farnsworth heard the whine of the two .30-30 bullets as they spatted into the adobe wall of the Haunted Cabin. Thunder instantly drowned out the echoing crack of the two saddle guns, blotting out from the big Britisher's ears the flat-toned voice that came so close behind Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw that they whirled from behind the bushwhacker shelter of the thick brush.

"Take it to the Mountie!" The hidden voice of Bill Magruder came from behind the brush where they had left their saddle horses. "Take it out in the open, or by Heaven I'll drop you both in your tracks!"

Magruder's voice traveled no farther than the ears of the two killers, but there was a deadliness in its harsh vehemence.

DARKNESS cloaked them, but the darkness would be torn into glaring white light at any second. There was an open clearing about fifty feet across between their bush-

wacker shelter and the adobe shelter of the Haunted Cabin. And there was only that big Britisher in the Mountie uniform to bar their way to the barricade of thick adobe walls.

Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw used no words. They quit the brush at the same second, like footracers leaving the starting line. Crouched, guns cocked and ready as they ran, they took the desperate gamble that darkness would hold for those few seconds they needed to cover that open stretch of ground.

The lightning and thunder came at the same instant—chain lightning that struck a giant hackberry tree not a hundred feet away.

Constable Farnsworth of the Mounted felt a brassy, sulphurous taste in his mouth and his nerves tingled like the sizzling ends of live wires. He had dropped his carbine and now he had the big, heavy-calibered army Webley in his hand as he fired point-blank at the two men who charged him from the brush. Lanky, lantern-jawed Butcher was a long-legged stride ahead of the squat, crouched, swarthy Jed. Their guns spewed fire as they charged the big Englishman in the scarlet tunic.

Farnsworth, a flat-lipped grin on his beefy

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face and his blue eyes bleak, shot as fast as he could pull the trigger.

Sam Butcher stumbled and tried to catch his balance. But his feet would not track and he came stumbling on, the .45 slugs from his six-shooter tearing up jets of dirt ahead of him. He coughed and blood spewed from his open mouth. And then he pitched headlong and the blood kept spilling from his mouth and down his long lantern jaw, clotting in his dirty colored whiskers. . . .

Jed Burkaw had lost his hat and his thick coarse black hair hung dankly down across his beady red eyes, but he kept shooting as he ran. But a man can't shoot straight when he is moving that fast and his bullets pocked the adobe wall at Farnsworth's scarlet back.

The Britisher was as cool and calm about it as if standing on a target range. He took quick aim—like a big game hunter taking aim at a charging lion. The Webley's big slugs tore down through Jed Burkaw's thick chest and into his belly as he kept on coming, as if nothing this side of hell could halt him. Then Farnsworth sent his last shot into the lowered black head. Jed Burkaw took one last step; simultaneously, his bullet-torn head lobbed forward and he doubled up and rolled over and onto his side. And then the rain came—a solid black wall of water, as if some unseen giant hand was pouring it down to cleanse the earth of the spilled blood.

Still Farnsworth stood there just outside the open doorway of the adobe cabin. He stood in the black deluge and felt its cold downpour on his flushed face and it bathed his whole huge bulk and plastered the scarlet tunic to his bulging shoulders. He was still standing in his tracks when the white lightning flared again, showing a strange grin on his sunburnt face. He stared down at the bullet-ripped bodies of Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw, then dismissed the dead men, his head lifting slowly until he was looking up through the drenching rain at the storm-filled sky above. He stood there like a man deep-rooted in prayer. And the darkness cloaked him.

Bill Magruder crouched behind the saddled horses hidden in the brush, watching, not daring to move or speak. He had not fired a shot. He had kept faith with the big Britisher who had a "matter of honor" to wipe out, with gunfire. But he had saved the life of Norman Farnsworth from a bushwhacker killing. And he was content now to let the cold rain sober him. It would not do for him to show himself, not yet.

IT WAS a long while before the next flash of lightning came. When it did light up the place, the red-coated Mountie no longer stood there in the rain. A match flared inside the cabin and through the open doorway Bill Magruder watched Farnsworth light a couple of candles. The Englishman moved about the Haunted Cabin in the candle light, pouring himself a stiff drink and downing it. Then he opened the big leather trunk.

Farnsworth had left the outer door open. Either he had forgotten to close it or he welcomed the cool rain-washed air in the cabin. He brought the leather-cased picture into the front room and propped it on the table there. And then as he lifted his drink of watered whiskey in a sort of salute, tears welled in his hard blue eyes and coursed unchecked down his beefy face.

Outlaw Bill Magruder waited for half an hour longer out in the night, waited until the storm had spent itself and gone on and stars had appeared and the moon was scudding behind broken clouds. Then he went back to where he had left his saddled horse, mounted, and rode up to a noisy halt in front of the open doorway.

Farnsworth came to the door. He still wore the ridiculously tight-fitting uniform, the scarlet buttonless tunic open, his wrists two inches below the cuffs. There was a grin on his face and his blue eyes sparkled. He gripped a half emptied bottle of Scotch whiskey in his hand. Farnsworth was a little tipsy.

"Bill Magruder! I say, old man, put up your mount and join me in a spot of good whiskey, what! But don't trip over the lads lyin' about. I've laid the ghosts of the ruddy Haunted Cabin. Quite! The estimable Butcher and the worthy Burkaw are no longer with us in the flesh. . . . Reminds me of a tale my uncle Sir Basil was so fond of relating when he was in his jolly old cups. It had to do with the chain clankin' ghosts that threw their ghastly weight about the hidden passages of the Castle Glenmore. . . . Sir Basil was havin' a ruddy go of it with the gout at the time, and rebellin' against the stern orders of his doctor, was wagin' his war of pain with a flagon of the oldest.

"He was mellow from it when the clankin' of chains interrupted his flagon tiltin'. A man of parts, Sir Basil, a real sportsman. Give and take, toe to toe, and all that. The clankin' ghosts of Castle Glenmore bein' throwbacks to the days of chivalry and Sir Lancelot and good old King Arthur, Sir Basil disdained the armament of more modern warfare and somehow managed to wriggle and sweat himself into a full suit of armor. Then, armed with a trusty battle axe, he let himself into the hidden passageway. . . .

"Sir Basil was found in due time, and hauled, bruised a bit about the bulges, back to the light of civilization, roarin' death and damnation. He swore he'd met and con-

quered the clankin' ghost of the castle, but the secret passageway had an outlet in the wine cellar, and the gore he'd told of wading in was rare old vintage stuff. They found his battle axe embedded in an oaken wine cask. . . ."

Bill Magruder put up his horse. He was unsaddling the Two Pole Punkin horses when Give-a-Damn Jones rode up. The saloon man brought with him a bulky brown paper envelope plaster with British stamps and addressed to the Honorable Norman Farnsworth, Earl of Glenmore. It had been fetched from the railroad by mounted messenger, he announced. Give-a-Damn Jones had likewise fetched the envelope containing the signed confessions of Sam Butcher and Jed Burkaw—and two quarts of his best whiskey.

"I got kinda worried after you pulled out for the Haunted Cabin, Bill," he mentioned.

They went into the adobe cabin and Farnsworth stared at the address on the letter, which came for his solicitors in England. There was an almost wistful twist to his grin.

"England," he murmured, "will be a bit dull. But I have to return. Next in line to the title, and all that. . . ."

Then he picked up the portrait in its leather case, his eyes shining. "We'll be married quietly," he murmured.

He said he knew what he'd find inside the envelope—a king's command, or something of the sort, calling him back to England. Then he ripped open the other envelope. And Bill Magruder and Give-a-Damn Jones watched the expression on his face as he read the confessions that cleared the name of Constable Norman Farnsworth of the Mounted.

Coming into an earldom meant but little to the big Britisher. But the clearing of the record of his brief career in the Mounties left him as happy, Give-a-Damn Jones said, as a kid with his first pair of red topped boots.

"I won't try to thank you chaps," he told the two finally. "I'd make a ruddy mess of it. But when I've told her the tale, Elizabeth will agree that if we've two sons, one shall be christened Bill Magruder Farnsworth. And the other shall bear the impressive name of Give-a-Damn Jones Farnsworth!"

FARNSWORTH dragged the battered leather portmanteau into the room, splitting the arm seams of the scarlet tunic.

Give-a-Damn Jones and Bill Magruder stared at the tall, crisp stacks of currency.

"The ruddy money was neatly stowed away in a large steel box," grinned the Englishman, "I came upon it quite by accident while diggin' up the graves in the Haunted Cabin Ranch cemetery. Ghoulish sort of pastime, what? But I'd bought a Haunted Cabin Ranch, and some of those tales sounded a bit far-fetched. So I thought I'd investigate.

Some two weeks later the Earl of Glenmore sailed for England by way of Buenos Aires. With him, sharing the best and largest cabin of the luxury liner, were two companions, who wore well-tailored clothes and derby hats. They were, said the Earl of Glenmore, his two secretaries, and they had little to do with other passengers. One of the secretaries had some difficulty keeping a black monocle screwed in a scarred socket that contained an artificial eye.

The luggage of the Earl of Glenmore had the customary foreign diplomat's privilege of passing through the Custom's office without the red-tape formality of custom's inspection. And the battered old leather portmanteau was left at Buenos Aires with the two secretaries who were going into the interior of Argentina.

"I'll fetch my bride," Norman Farnsworth, the Earl of Glenmore, told Bill Magruder and Give-a-Damn Jones, "when I pay a visit to your cattle ranch in the Argentina interior. Maybe then Elizabeth will be convinced I'm not yarning after the style of the famous Sir Basil. Meanwhile, I'm saying farewell to the two staunchest friends any man ever had!"

It was a year later when the mail brought two official looking letters to what the two pardners called the Haunted Ranch in Argentine. One letter contained a newspaper page with photographs of the formal ceremony making Norman Farnsworth, Earl of Glenmore, a Sergeant in the Northwest Mounted Constabulary of Canada.

The other letter bore the seal of the United States Government, and contained a full and absolute pardon for Bill Magruder, provided he did not return to the United States. All money had been returned, said an accompanying letter, by said Bill Magruder, through the agency of the Earl of Glenmore.

On top of the two letters came a lengthy cablegram from Norman Farnsworth, Earl of Glenmore, asking Bill Magruder and Give-a-Damn Jones to meet him and his wife at the port of Buenos Aires. It read:

ELIZABETH STILL CALLS IT A PAGE FROM THE BOOK OF SIR BASIL. BUT THE TWINS, WILLIAM MAGRUDER FARNSWORTH AND GEORGE ALBERT DURHAM JONES FARNSWORTH, TAKE IT IN THEIR ROUND-EYED STRIDE FOR THE GOSPEL. TILL WE EXCHANGE THE RUDDY OLD BANDIT PASSWORD AT THE DOCK, THEN, STAND BY TO REPEL BOARDERS!

FARNSWORTH, OF THE MOUNTED.

THE END

LONE-

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

THE dirt-clouded loft window was very small, but through it the Chihuahua Kid could watch every movement down on this main street of Painted Rock. He hadn't been quite sure where he was going when he'd climbed into the second story of this building opposite the Stallion Saloon. It had been dark six hours ago, and he'd come through the back end of town, stumbling through side alleys cluttered with refuse.

The door to the loft had been open and he'd gone up the stairs, and only when he'd stumbled again over several thick, heavy sacks did he realize that he was in a grain loft over the Painted Rock General Store, directly facing the main intersection!

Because the Kid had always had a sense of humor, he was able to grin at this. He'd hoped to find a deserted building in a corner of the town where he could hide out till nightfall, and then pick up a mount and head north again. Or better still, swing to the south, going back over his own trail, and then cut around to the north, thus confusing Sheriff Christian Manton still further.

Lying on a pile of empty sacks, with a three-foot bulwark of filled grain sacks between himself and the stairway to the lower floor, the Kid considered whether he should risk smoking a cigarette up here. Down below he could hear people talking. There were buckboards lined up outside the door, and women came in and out constantly, shopping. An hour ago a man had come up the stairs, lifted a sack of potatoes to

The Kid brought his gun up, knowing already it was too late. He turned and glimpsed Manton.

WOLF PARDNERS

They were two who always fought alone. . . . Until that bleak day in Painted Rock when Fate brought them together, two hunted, hated outcasts who found that trust, as well as danger, may take cold-nerved courage!

his shoulder, and gone down again. The Kid wondered whether they would notice that he'd shifted a few bags around to form his bulwark between himself and the stairway. He had his six-gun, a big Navy Colt with a blue barrel, lying on the sack bed beside him, but he wasn't anxious to use it on a total stranger. Christian Manton was a different matter because Christian, the "killer" sheriff from Bow City, two hundred miles to the south, was a devil from hell and deserved to die eight times over.

Stiffly, the Kid sat up, his back against the grain sacks. He rolled a half dozen cigarettes and slid them into his shirt pocket. Cigarette smoke could easily be identified up here in the loft, and if a man should happen to come up again, he might suspect something. The Kid decided he would smoke the cigarettes tonight, while riding out of Painted Rock on a stolen horse.

He had no compunctions about stealing a horse, even though he'd never stooped to such a business before. He'd had his little troubles in Bow City and the surrounding country; he'd even killed a tough on one occasion when the man tried to bully him. He was small of frame, and he had a face like a young boy, but there was steel in his eyes—blue steel.

George Bender, the gambler in Dixie Holt's Bow City Paradise House, had predicted, "You'll die at the end of a rope before you're twenty-one, Kid."

But the Chihuahua Kid would have to guess when he was twenty-one, because he didn't know when or where he'd been born. He remembered that as a kid of seven he'd worked for Sam Smalley, a bartender. He'd swept out Smalley's barroom with a mop bigger than himself. Before that, things were quite vague, and the Kid had never worried too much about them. A man lived in the present, and the present was very important now because he was the same as a mad dog, to be shot down on sight. Such, at least, was the purport of the posters Sheriff Christian Manton had drawn up, and which he was even now distributing through Painted Rock.

The Kid could see one of these posters directly across the street, a distance of about sixty feet. The poster was tacked to the wall of the Stallion Saloon, and occasionally a man would pause to look at it. The citizens of Bow City were offering five hundred dollars reward for the apprehension of the Chihuahua Kid, and that sum would be paid out if the Kid was brought in dead or alive. Christian Manton would prefer to get him dead, because a corpse couldn't talk, and talking might embarrass Sheriff Manton, who himself had held up the Bow City stage in Kiowa Gap, killing Dick Neville, the driver, and getting off with at least three thousand dollars in gold.

From a ridge above the Gap, the Kid had watched this hold-up, and he'd recognized the men involved. Christian Manton, with a mask over the lower portions of his face, had stopped the stage, and Neville had foolishly tried to scoop up his heavy Sharp's rifle. Manton's first bullet had caught him in the throat, and Neville was dead even before the Kid could lift his own weapon from its holster.

The stage had had one passenger, Merritt Carver, a good friend of Sheriff Manton. Stepping out of the stage, Carver had spotted the Kid up on the ridge and snatching up the dead Neville's gun, had opened fire on him. Driven to cover, the Kid, right then, had gotten ideas about the stage robbery.

George Bender, the gambler, had sent out a boy with a note to Juan Pasquales' place, where he'd known the Kid would be. Bender's note said that Christian Manton was already organizing a posse to bring the Kid in for the murder of Neville, Merritt Carver having sworn that he'd seen the Kid do the job. There were no loopholes in the sheriff's plan. They were taking Carver's word. And why not, against the word of a shiftless drifter?

It would be Carver's word against the Kid's, and Carver was the friend of Christian Manton. No one thought of questioning Manton's decisions because Christian was the most notorious gunman in the Southwest, with a long string of killings to his credit. The citizens of Bow City had hired Manton, feeling that a killer was the best antidote to prospective killers. Manton had cleaned out the hard-cases in Bow City, then had gone to work on the decent people like Dick Neville. The Kid had suspected Manton of double-dealing even before the Kiowa Gap hold-up.

ON A fast horse, the Kid had eluded Manton's posse and had ridden until the animal had pulled up with a bad leg just outside of

Painted Rock. Knowing Manton would think he was hiding out in the hills, he'd deliberately gone into the town and selected his hiding place. He knew Manton would shoot him down on sight. There would be no trial—no opportunity to present any evidence in his own behalf.

Four horses stood in the hot sun outside the Stallion Saloon, the buckskin animal on the left belonging to Christian Manton. Two hours before, awakening from a brief nap, the Kid had watched the four riders swing around the corner at the next street, and head for the Stallion. He'd been surprised that Manton's posse was so small; he'd been under the impression that the Sheriff had brought at least a dozen men with him, but there was excellent reason for the smallness of the posse. Manton had brought with him men of his own stamp—Merritt Carver, and his two deputies, Larrimore and McKee. He could be sure of them.

Up here in the loft, the Kid could feel the heat boring down through the roof. Sitting back from the window about three feet he could watch the scene below and still not be seen. The crust of dirt on the window formed a kind of screen in front of him.

He felt sweat trickling down his temples and wondered, vaguely, what would happen if he got up suddenly and walked down the back steps into the side alley. Wandering through these side streets he could find a stable, and with the help of his gun pick himself a good horse. It would be another five hours before the sun went down, and he would be reasonably sure of keeping ahead of Manton until then. After dark he could back-track and head east or west, changing his course, later, for north. He'd heard of the big cow outfits along the Powder River, and a man with his knowledge of horses could easily get himself a job. Manton would never go as far as that in his search.

He discarded this plan after a while, deciding it would be safer to wait until darkness. Manton had put a pretty good description of him on those dodgers, and he might be spotted.

The Kid watched the four horses. Heat waves shimmered up from the road. With the sun almost directly overhead, there was little shade in the street, and the citizens of Painted Rock gradually disappeared indoors.

The Kid watched a brown and white cur lying in a patch of shade outside the Stallion Saloon. He'd seen the dog, tongue lolling, cross the road a few minutes before, seeking shade, and pausing to sniff at a drunk lying on a bench outside the saddlemaker's shop, next to the saloon.

The dog was quite big, and maybe part shepherd, the Kid surmised. Every town had one of them wandering around, ownerless, living on scraps and handouts. This animal had a heavy coat and seemed to be suffering more from the heat because of it.

The Kid licked his own parched lips. He'd had no water since late the previous evening, and there was no possibility of getting any until nightfall. There was nothing to do but wait, listening to the noises below, and watching the street. For want of a better occupation, he took apart his gun and cleaned it with an oiled rag, telling himself all the while that he was a fool. If someone were to walk up here while he had the gun apart, he'd be trapped.

He figured it was about three o'clock when Christian Manton came out of the Stallion, wiping his lips with the sleeve of his right hand. Manton was a blocky man with a black mustache. He had a small stub of a nose and a pair of black slanted eyes. The mouth, beneath the black mustache, was long and thin-lipped.

Manton grimly studied the horses for a moment, then turned and walked down the street. The Kid figured that he would see about new mounts. The four men in the posse had ridden those horses pretty hard, and they weren't fit for another gruelling drive. Not only the horses, but the men too, were pretty well worn out, and it was for this reason that Manton had paused in Painted Rock before hitting the trail out of town.

He'll rest up tonight, the Kid reasoned, *and take up the trail tomorrow at dawn.*

Christian Manton took one step, and then his heavy boot came down on the outstretched paw of the brown and white mongrel lying in the shade of the saloon. The cur scrambled up with an ear-piercing howl, nearly upsetting Manton, who had not seen it.

Still barking and howling, the dog limped excitedly around Manton, who was cursing and kicking at it. Manton's boot caught it in the ribs, rolling it over and over out into the gutter.

A shopkeeper jumped out of a store farther down the street, yelled at the top of his voice, "Mad dog!"

He disappeared inside the shop and came out with a Winchester rifle. Manton already had his gun out of the holster and sent one shot close to the frightened animal. The Kid saw dust spurt up in the road. Then the man with the Winchester opened up, and another geyser of dust leaped up a foot away from the dog.

Merritt Carver and Larrimore, one of the deputies, ran out of the Stallion Saloon, guns in hand, and the Kid saw from their expressions that they thought Manton had spotted his prey. He had to grin at that as the two possemen watched the brown and white dog streak down the road, rueful expressions stealing across their faces.

Other people were appearing in the street, some of them with guns in their hands. The

Kid heard another gun, but he couldn't see whether the animal had been hit or not. It was gone, now, down an alley on his side of the main street.

The Kid thought: *Manton frightened the poor mutt out of his wits. That's all.*

BECAUSE of the heat and the excitement, there had been specks of foam around the animal's mouth, giving it a wild appearance. The Kid felt a little better after this slight diversion. He watched Manton talking with Carver and Larrimore for a few moments. Then Ace McKee joined them, and the Kid's jaw twitched. He held the big Navy Colt in his lap, fingers caressing the smooth hickory butt. At this short distance, there was a good chance that he could shoot down the whole four of them from the window, before they could even get their weapons out of leather. He didn't like the idea. *Even a dog,* he thought, *should be given a chance for its life.*

He watched the four men go back inside the saloon and pictured them at the bar, drinking cold beer. The heat in the loft now seemed even more oppressive. The Kid unbuttoned his shirt and mopped his wet face with his bandanna.

The excitement had died away down in the street, and men were seeking the shade again, many of them returning to their afternoon siesta. From the other end of town, the Kid heard small boys yelling excitedly, the sound drifting up to him faintly. Another gun popped, and he imagined the supposedly wild dog racing down the alleys, panting, eyes wild.

The Kid swore softly, and was relaxing against the pile of grain bags when he heard a sound of padded feet coming up the stairway. Something bounded over the barrier he'd erected and flopped down less than six feet from where he was sitting. It was the brown and white mongrel, white specks of foam dripping from its mouth, its sides heaving, damp with perspiration. The animal's eyes were big, brown, and terror-stricken.

The Kid came up on his knees, the gun very steady, muzzle pointed at a spot between the dog's eyes. Sweat started to trickle down his forehead as he waited, tensely. One bark from this animal would bring a swarm of men up into the loft, and then two lives would be blotted out—a man's and a dog's.

The Kid cursed his luck, silently, bitterly. There were a hundred houses into which the mongrel could have run, but it had had come in through the rear door of the store. The Kid had the feeling that the cards were turning against him, and it was not a good feeling.

Silently, expectantly, they watched each other, the hunted animal and the hunted man. The dog was still tense, as if awaiting a blow or a kick, as if ready to run or bark at the slightest provocation.

"Hell," the Kid muttered, "go ahead an' do it."

He remembered then that he had a big pocket knife in his trousers, a six inch blade on the knife. He wondered how much noise the cur would make if he plunged the knife into its jugular vein and held it to the floor until it was dead. The knife would be better than the gun, more gory, a little less pleasant, but silent.

The Kid let the gun barrel droop. He wiped the back of his left hand across his brow and waited, trying to settle this thing in his mind. The dog watched him expectantly for fully thirty seconds then, as nothing happened, dropped its head between its paws, still watching the Kid closely, but making no sound.

"Hell an' damnation!" the Kid breathed. "The hound knows we got to keep quiet!"

The mongrel took a deep breath, settling its big head more firmly between its paws. The Kid could see now that there was blood on its left paw. He saw a piece of thorn sticking from the pad, and he crawled forward, without thinking, to pull it out.

The mongrel licked the spot, but made no sound. A slow grin spread across the Kid's brown face. *This is how it is,* he thought.

Both of us are mad dogs on the run. That damned hound knows it!

Leaning back against the sacks, the Kid watched the animal for about five minutes. Down below he could hear the proprietor of the store talking to a customer. The man had a nasal voice, and the Kid didn't like it.

Glancing through the window, the Kid saw two men crossing the street to the saloon. One of them had a pencil stuck behind his right ear, and he was talking rapidly to the other. There were no sounds below, and the Kid surmised that the proprietor had stepped across the street for a drink, leaving the store empty for a few moments.

Sliding the gun into the holster, the Kid stood up suddenly. The dog came up also, shaking its shaggy head.

"Down," the Kid murmured.

The mongrel went down on its haunches again, and the Kid gulped in surprise. *He listens to me,* the Kid thought. *He must like me.*

Very carefully, he slid over the top of the bags and stepped to the stairway. This was another chance, he realized, but a man had to take chances. There was the possibility that an assistant might still be down there in the store.

The Kid went down the steps and two of them creaked badly despite his efforts to make as little noise as possible. He saw the door opening on the rear alley—the one by which he and the dog had entered. The other door, off to the left, led to the store.

GUN in hand, the Kid peered around the door post. A clock was ticking behind the counter—the sound startlingly loud in the emptiness of the big room. There were shelves behind the counter and barrels and bags of food standing around the room.

It took a few moments before he located the water bucket on a show case at the far end of the room. He made the bucket in six long strides, and facing the door, scooped up a dipper full of water. He spilled some of it down his shirt in his haste, but it tasted wonderful.

He could watch the saloon door through the store window, and he took several drinks before his thirst was quenched. A cracker barrel stood a few feet away, and the Kid bent down, grabbing up a handful of the crackers and stuffing them into his pockets. Then he slid the gun into its holster and got both hands full, cramming the crackers into his pockets while he carefully watched the saloon door.

He took a step toward the stairway, then stopped suddenly, remembering the dog. On a nearby shelf was a quantity of pots and pans. The Kid grabbed a pan, filled it with water, and then hurried toward the staircase. He saw the saloon door opening across the street, saw the man with the pencil behind his ear come out.

In his anxiety, the Kid spilled some of the water. He cursed softly, staring at the wet spots on the wood floor and wondering if the proprietor would notice them.

He went up the stairs with the filled pan, and clambering across the barrier of bags, placed it in front of the dog. The animal made a lot of noise drinking, but the Kid didn't have the heart to stop it. He heard the door open below, then could hear steps on the floor. He sat on the pile of empty sacks watching the dog drink until the pan was dry.

The mongrel sat down again, but this time with its head against the Kid's boot. Grinning, the Kid leaned forward and scratched its neck. He remembered the crackers then, and took them out of his pockets, placing them in a small pile in front of him.

The dog watched, but made no attempt to take the crackers. The Kid pushed one in front of its nose, and watched the strong teeth crunch it. *I got a friend,* the Kid thought mirthlessly.

They finished the crackers together, and then the Kid lay on his back, looking up at the loft roof. He could hear the mongrel breathing contentedly now, the wildness gone out of its eyes.

They'll shoot him tomorrow, the Kid thought. *They'll be afraid for their kids. He doesn't even know enough to run, but I can get away.*

He was thinking as he went off to sleep again that both of them owed their bad luck to Christian Manton, and that, ironically enough, Manton would be returning to Bow City with one of them dead, and the other still on the dodge.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but when he awoke it was dark. He could see stars through the loft window; reaching out, he felt the damp muzzle of the dog. It was very quiet, down below.

The Kid edged up to the window and looked down. There was no light on the board walk, and there would have been if the store were still open and the lamps lighted.

He could hear the noise from the Stallion Saloon across the way, and looking over the batwing doors, saw the men lined up along the bar. Several loungers stood outside the saloon, but the four horses which had been at the hitch rack were gone.

There were several other saloons along the street, all of them apparently well-filled, which would indicate the hour as some time past nine o'clock. Earlier than that, the Kid realized, they would be half empty.

He stood up and stretched himself. He'd placed the gun on a bag at his side, and now

had to feel around for it. *Time to go,* he thought. There would be plenty of horses in the stables in town, and he could take his choice.

He climbed over the pile of bags and felt his way to the staircase. He heard the soft, padded steps behind him, and grinned. He went down the steps very carefully, thinking that the storekeeper probably lived in some part of the building.

Pausing at the bottom step, he looked into the store. It was quite dark, but he could make out some objects. Starlight, and the bright lamps from the Stallion Saloon, provided sufficient light for him to find the water bucket again.

He took a long drink, then poured some into a pan for the dog. There was no need for haste now; he had the entire evening in which to slip out of town. He found the cracker barrel again and filled his pockets, tossing half a dozen to the mongrel. He heard the dog's strong teeth crunching the crackers as he walked toward the alley door.

It was latched this time, whereas the previous evening it had been opened—left that way by an oversight, apparently. The Kid slid the latch back and stepped out into the night. He heard the dog come out after him, and he said softly, "You go your way, friend."

IT WAS very dark out here in the alley, and he picked his way carefully, remembering the rusted tin cans and refuse he'd stumbled over the previous evening.

He went down the alley, moving away from the main street. At the head of the alley he stumbled into a man coming the other way. The man cursed drunkenly.

The Kid stepped away quickly, gun in hand, but didn't say anything. He heard the drunk stagger along the wall, stumbling over tin cans as he went. The Kid stepped out into the next street and stood on the corner for a few moments. He took one of the cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lighted it, his face turned toward the wall of the building.

This street was lined with homes—the saloons and dance halls were all on the next avenue. Two men on horseback came around the next corner, and the Kid saw them against the light of the night sky. Remembering the drunk in the alley, he started to lurch as he walked, hat pulled down over his face. He felt reasonably safe from recognition, but there was always the possibility Manton or his deputies would be riding around town.

The horsemen went by, and the Kid turned up the next alley, walking the entire length, and then turning back when he realized there were no stable entrances on it. This would be a question of hit-or-miss until he located a stable off the main street. In addition, he

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would have to locate one in which the hostler or stableman was out for the moment.

He tried two more alleys and side streets before locating the stable. He smelled it before he came up, and heard rats scuffling in the alley, indicating its proximity. A small, bald-headed man was currying a big buckskin animal inside the stable. A lantern hung at the stable entrance, and another inside, suspended from a hook on a post.

The Kid remained out in the darkness, beyond the circle of light. He backed up against the opposite wall of the alley and waited. Sooner or later, the hostler would leave the stable for a glass of beer or a word with a friend. It would take but a minute, then, to throw one of the saddles across that buckskin and lead him down the alley. The animal had good bottom, and was very solid in the chest. He could run. The Kid stared as the horse turned its head slightly. The buckskin had a white face. It was Manton's horse!

The Kid started to grin again.

He had to wait nearly a half hour before the hostler finished with his task and pushed the buckskin into an empty stall. The Kid straightened as the hostler left the stable.

The Kid waited until he was positive no one else was there. Then, darting inside, he lifted a saddle from a peg and threw it across the buckskin. He had difficulty tightening the cinches because the horse was wary of him.

"Easy," the Kid said softly. He led the buckskin toward the stable door, then stopped abruptly. Voices floated down the alley. He waited, hoping that whoever they were, they would pass on to the next street.

Still the Kid kept his right hand near the gun as the men in the alley came closer. The first to come into the light was Merritt Carver, lanky, sharp-nosed, with small ratlike eyes. Carver was talking with Ace McKee, Manton's deputy, a short, fat-faced man with blinking blue eyes. About McKee there was always an air of innocence which put other men off guard.

It was McKee who recognized the Kid first. McKee's right hand dipped and came up with a Smith & Weston .38. The Kid shot the fat-faced man through the chest, the force of the heavy slug knocking McKee out of the lamplight.

The Kid saw the orange flame spit from the muzzle of McKee's gun even as he fell, heard the slug strike the flesh of the buckskin with a sickening slap. The big animal reared up, screaming in pain and yanking the Kid around. It was this break which caused Merritt Carver to miss him completely.

The Kid released his grip on the reins as the buckskin banged widly into one of the stalls. He skipped away, fired at Carver.

The slug knocked the deputy down, rolling him over. He came up on one elbow, face contorted, his mouth a thin slit.

Carver's slug took him in the side, biting deep, making the Kid feel very sick and very weak after the first shock. He managed to shoot Carver through the forehead.

BEHIND him, the Kid heard the buckskin kicking as it lay on the floor, and the kicks were getting feebler, indicating that McKee's slugs were proving fatal to the animal. McKee himself lay on the ground near the doorway, body hunched up as if he had a terrible stomach ache. The fat man was rolling gently back and forth, but no sounds came from him.

Slumped against a post, the Kid stared around the stable.

Mentally, he picked out a small black in the nearest stall. He got his feet steadied, then heard a slight sound in the rear of the barn.

Instinctively, the Kid brought up his gun, knowing that it was already too late. He turned and glimpsed Manton behind him. The sheriff had a big Remington leveled on him.

There was the possibility, a very faint one, that Manton's first slug would not finish the fight, and the Kid gambled on that chance. Bringing his gun up, he felt something brush his right leg. He heard the low growl, then, and saw the brown and white streak going into the air straight for Manton's throat.

Manton's gun roared, and the dog crumpled in mid-air. Manton got off another shot even before the dog fell to the ground. The Kid took that slug through the flesh of his arm.

It was an easy price to pay. His own bullet ripped through Manton's vest.

The dog lay on the ground five feet from the kid, quivering, whimpering a little. The Kid looked at the black horse in the stall, at the doorway, and then back toward the dog. He hadn't seen Larrimore come in, but he knew the remaining deputy would never risk a fight now.

Stumbling over to the dog, the Kid dropped down and rolled the animal over.

"Damn it," the Kid muttered, "you didn't have to do that. I'd have had him with that first shot." But he knew he wouldn't have. He found the bullet hole through the dog's shoulder. It did not seem too serious.

The Kid holstered the gun and got his arms around the dog and dragged it toward the stall in which the black was waiting.

The dog was heavy, and the Kid gritted his teeth as he picked it up.

He held the big dog in place in front of him as he rode without haste toward the hills.

"We need a little patching up," the Kid told himself, "an' then we'll be all right." He added thoughtfully, "Me, an' my friend."

BEAN-BAGGED!

By JHAN ROBBINS

Old Judge Roy Bean was the only law west of Pecos — and brother, could he lay 'er down!

WHEN Judge Roy Bean was the law west of the Pecos, this famous frontier jurist, purely in the interests of justice, dealt a number of staggering body blows to the established system of jurisprudence under which the rest of the country was living. Texas, he was fond of pointing out, was a very unusual country.

One of the great legal keystones the Judge kicked aside was the principle that when a man dies, his crimes die with him. "Not in Texas," the Judge insisted. And in one of the best-liked of the Roy Bean legends, he proved that in the Lone Star State, the power of the law reaches beyond death, right up to the brink of the grave.

On a Sunday afternoon in 1892, a heavy wind was blowing up Myers Canyon, a deep rock cleft about four miles east side of Langtry. A light wooden bridge that spanned the canyon was rattling and swaying as it clung perilously to two jutting rocks. No one had crossed the bridge all day; it was dangerous in windy weather.

At the Jersey Lily, a saloon in Langtry, a number of stone masons and carpenters were passing the day, among them one Pat O'Brien. Pat early cast a wet blanket on the party by explaining that he didn't drink and he couldn't sing. The rest of the jubilant Irishmen looked with scowls upon this renegade in their midst and invited him to leave.

Morosely, O'Brien set out for a walk. He buttoned his coat closely about him against the wind that whistled down the gully. In his hip pocket was a six-shooter, its bulk revealed plainly as he tightened his jacket. He was not a quarrelsome sort, and his companions later remarked they had no idea he habitually carried a gun.

The town of Langtry offered little entertainment on a Sunday afternoon. O'Brien wandered around a bit, then headed out of town just as it began to grow dark. He followed the railroad tracks to the head of Myers Canyon, then ventured out upon the bridge.

As he edged across, battling the stiff wind, a sudden strong gust swept him from his feet and rolled him off the bridge. He was killed on the jagged rocks below.

When his searching fellow workers found the body, they sent at once for Roy Bean. The judge trotted out his light wagon and fetched the body of Pat O'Brien back to the Jersey Lily and laid it out on the saloon table.

A search of the dead man's pockets brought to light the six-shooter and about forty dollars in cash. The judge eyed the body in an irritated way. "I've got to bury this poor devil," he muttered, "and right now the ground is mighty hard."

"What happens to the forty dollars?" someone piped up. Judge Bean eyed the pile of small bills with a speculative eye. Then, according to the earliest version, printed in the *San Antonio Express,* he turned and addressed the impromptu jury:

"Gentlemen," he said, "this dead body fell from the bridge, and that is all there is about it. But there is one thing that is not so plain. What was he doing with that hidden gun? Of course, since he's dead he can't offer no satisfactory explanation of the matter, but that's his hard luck. Justice is justice and the law is the law and I shall be obliged to fine him exactly forty dollars for carrying a concealed weapon." Then the homespun lawgiver drew a deep breath and uttered a history-making verdict:

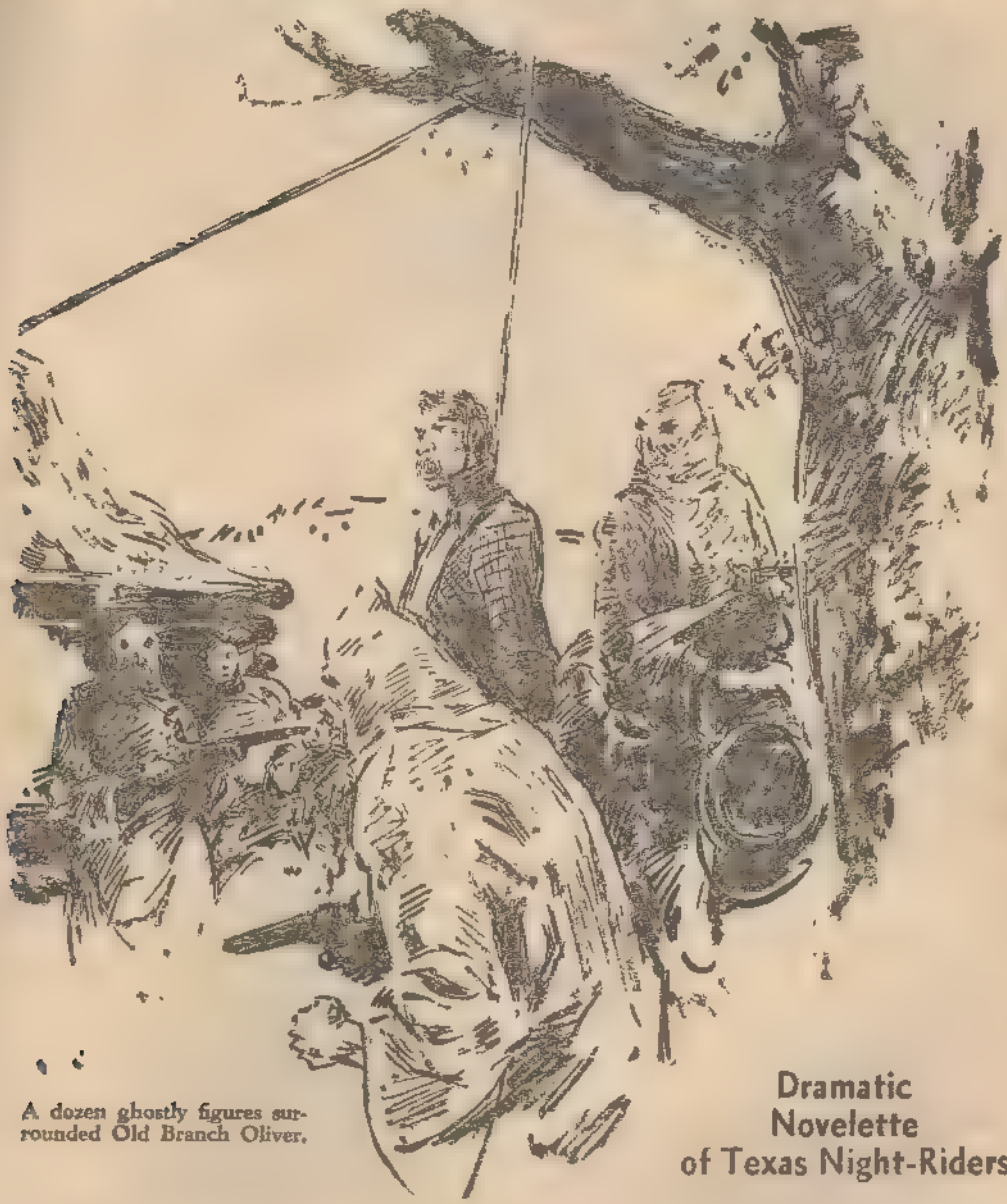
"Just because a man chooses to put on a pair of wings," he concluded, "is no reason why the great State of Texas should not have what is coming to her all the same." Then he scooped up the forty dollars, put it in his rear pants pocket, and announced crisply, "Case closed!"

FIGHTING SONS OF

By
BOB
OBETS

Whichever side of the Border he rode, Big Jim Jericho could be sure of one thing: It would take more than a coward's white mask to save him from dying with a bullet in his back, wearing the brand that told both friend and enemy that Big Jim had betrayed his sacred trust to the land he loved.

THE LONE STAR



A dozen ghostly figures surrounded Old Branch Oliver.

Dramatic Novelette of Texas Night-Riders

CHAPTER ONE

"You're Under Arrest!"

THESE were the years when the legend of the Two Jims was growing. Thousands upon thousands of Texas cattle left their native thickets for the long drive north, with the clack of horns and hoofs and the plaintive bawling of the longhorns protesting against the part they must play. For in order that old Texas, exhausted and prostrate after the long and bloody war, might rear up on her haunches again, the longhorned beasts had to plod northward to Kansas, and get themselves sold for a lot of gold coins and be cut up into beefsteak.

These were the years when a scalawag gov-

ernor ruled the State; when freed Negroes and renegade whites rode the land, clad in blue uniforms, working hardship and oppression on guilty and guiltless alike, all in the name of the State Police. These policemen invoked martial law, and they worked hand in glove with the Freedmen's Bureaus which claimed to protect the colored folk. But these bureaus were a mockery. They discriminated against honest men, and as a protection against them many Texans rode the night shrouded in white garments, with their faces masked, dispensing justice, and oft-times revenge, with a hasty and violent hand.

Neither Big Jim Jerico nor his partner, Sudden Jim, would, at first, ride with the white-sheeted bands. Such goings on, under cover of the darkness and the masks they wore, seemed cowardly to Big Jim Jerico, who was blunt and straightforward in all his dealings, including those that called for gun settlement.

Sudden Jim Whip, who wasn't a man to do much deliberating, heard of the night riders and forthwith spoke his mind.

"We fought for four years, Big Jim, so's the South could keep her slaves and her principles, both. But the Nawth whupped us. They whupped us proper and fair, the damn yankees. I sure don't aim to turn around and sneak-fight in the night time."

The Two Jims were just back from their second trail drive, this one to Abilene, where they had sold their cattle for fourteen thousand dollars in gold, loaded the treasure on the back of a wicked-eyed steer named Old Blue, and headed for Texas and home. On the way they had stopped off, near Doan's Crossing, long enough to free a girl from the treacherous hands of the Comanches who had captured her. In this affair, Link, the free Negro, had got a carbine slug through his chest, while the one-eyed Mexican brought away a painful arrow wound. Somewhere in this affair, too, the Two Jims fell out, but they made friends again. They brought their blue steer and their gold, their battered crew and their womenfolk back to Texas, and they were busy rebuilding their ranch headquarters, on the Nueces—burned to ashes by a Mexican named Chavez—so that they had all but forgotten Lieutenant Fox, that worthy of the State Police, who held a murder charge over Big Jim's head.

Lieutenant Fox, perhaps remembering his last meeting with the Two Jims, when he had been lured by trickery to a lonesome swamp and there left by Sudden Jim, fastened by his own handcuffs, came to the Two Jims' ranch with stealth and at an hour when he might expect the pair to be asleep. He knew the layout of the place, for he appeared in Big Jim's bedroom, on tiptoe, and holding a big pistol ready in his hand.

THE man on the bed was a sound sleeper. The buzz-saw sound of his snoring never faltered while the steel cuffs were snapped around his wrists—wrists as thick, the lieutenant observed with satisfaction, as the stifles of a horse. The lieutenant stepped back, and the harshness and the volume of his voice betrayed his feeling of a risky assignment well done.

"James Patrick Jerico, in the name of the State of Texas, I place you under arrest!"

The buzz saw seemed to strike a resinous knot. The man on the bed sat up, whereupon the lieutenant stepped back smartly, gun at ready.

"No tricks, Jerico! My man, Pelzer, is outside the window with a Yager lined on your back. Pelzer! You there?"

"*Ja . . . Ja,*" answered Pelzer. And there was a metallic click as he manipulated the Yager's mechanism.

Sudden Jim and his dark-eyed Lolita, sleeping in the next room, could hardly have failed to hear part of this. But from the room came no sound that Lieutenant Fox could hear. He couldn't, of course, hear the urgent whispering of Sudden Jim in Lolita's ear, nor could he have heard her as she slipped from the room and went around the house toward the long adobe building which, when the roof was put on it, was to be the Two Jims' new bunkhouse.

Only two things had Lieutenant Fox overlooked: The mind of Sudden Jim, which in emergencies worked like a lightning flash; and the stubborn courage of a freed black boy named Link, who thought Big Jim Jerico was the god of all the Texas Brush Country. . . .

Sudden Jim, who slept light as a cat, knew at once that the police could not have ridden up to the house. He would have heard them. So their horses would be staked in the brush, saddled and handy. They would have ridden out from Dog Town, most likely, and in that direction he would find their horses. . . . So about the time Lieutenant Fox was shoving his prisoner out the ranch house door and dreaming dreams of valor and reward, Sudden Jim was slipping through the mesquite, his ears cocked for any betraying sound of stamping hoof or whinny of greeting.

Lieutenant Fox, outside the house, was marching with his pistol barrel hard into his prisoner's back when his eye fell upon the nape of his captive's neck. The lieutenant's eyes bulged.

"You're not Jim Jerico!"

"Yes-suh," said a stubborn Southern voice, "yes-suh, boss, I sho'ly am. I'm Big Jim Jerico and you done arrested me. Now take me on to jail."

The rest of it has been told countless times. In one version of the story, Big Jim Jerico came riding from the brush on a white horse

that breathed fire from its nostrils. His voice sounded like the trumpet of doom, and he rode Lieutenant Fox into the ground. But the truth is, Big Jim Jerico's escape was a narrow one, and only the courage of Link, the free Negro, hauled so ruthlessly from the sick bed where Big Jim had put him until he could recover from his bullet wound, saved Big Jim from stopping a chunk of lead.

For Big Jim, appearing at the corner of the ranch house, saw the enraged policeman slap Link with the six-shooter barrel. The blow was a glancing one, but it brought blood, and Big Jim yelled out in wrath: "Heah I am, you condemned carpet-bagger! Try arrestin' me face to face, and leave that colored boy be!"

But Lieutenant Fox had his gun ready. Figuring to blast Big Jim down and then do any arresting that might prove necessary, he whirled and fired. But Link, slamming against the lieutenant, spoiled his aim. Before the lieutenant could pick himself up from the ground, Sudden Jim came galloping on a hammer-headed roan—the lieutenant's private saddler—and the episode, for the time being at least, was over. For Sudden Jim lit down, never stopping the roan. Big Jim hit leather in a running mount, and he never pulled rein until he reached the south bank of the Rio Grande.

So began the train of events that were to bring bitterness to Big Jim and to Sudden Jim, that were to cause Big Jim to ride with the white-sheeted bands, and that were, in the end, to bring to Big Jim Jerico the realization that Texas is the land of fighting men—a land worth fighting for, even as men in the Alamo had fought. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

On the Dodge

ONE roaring night in Matamoras, Big Jim met again the dashing *caballero,* Don Juan Nepomuceno Cortinas, who even then had his bold eyes set upon the *Presidente's* chair. This was the man who, in later years, was to be called the Red Raider, raiding and robbing and making big and bloody tracks along the lower reaches of the Rio Grande. But he was, nevertheless, a man of courage and great ambition, and all he needed—so he told Big Jim—was the tools with which to work out his destiny. He needed, in short, guns—good American guns—and Big Jim was the man to get them for him.

He was a forceful talker, this rising Mexican chieftain, and under the spell of his words—and the warmth of good *pulque*—the whole proposition shone bright and alluring. For Big Jim it would be a simple matter to run the guns across the Rio Grande. The troops at Fort Brown and at Ringgold Barracks might object, of course, and then too, there was the State Police. Still—

Big Jim thought later it was the idea of the State Police that hooked him—the idea of running contraband into Mexico, right under their meddlesome noses. But he had to admit that the jet-black hair and the startling eyes of Lupe Cordova—eyes blue as Texas bluebonnets—had something to do with his decision, also. She was, he learned later, Don Juan Cortinas' woman. But her voice was whispery and it set nerves to quivering along Big Jim's spine.

"You run the guns, Jeem, and some day this Juanito takes the *Presidente's* chair. I sit on the right and you sit on the left of him!"

Her eyes, through the cigarette smoke, were big blue stars against the golden ivory of her face. Big Jim reached for his *pulque,* and the fumes of it and the thought of her wonderful strong body filled his brain. In that moment he failed to notice the glitter in the eyes of Don Juan.

Big Jim, in fact, brought in one load of guns and was making delivery on the second—two stout pack mules carrying two cases of carbines each, the wooden cases neatly wrapped in water-proof canvas. He arrived

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at Don Juan's headquarters near Los Cuevos, and in his eagerness to surprise Lupe he never waited to unsaddle or to unpack the mules. He went across the patio and before a door that opened onto this moonlit space, he stopped. He could imagine Lupe in her bed, her firm, rounded bosom gently lifting to the rhythm of her breathing. His own breath came hard, and his heart began pounding.

Easy, now, easy. That rooster of a Don Juan sleeps terrible light—and right in the next room, too!

Big Jim's hand was poised for a light rap on the door. Then the hand was snatched away as if suddenly the wood of the door had grown hot.

"Ah, *corazón mío*," the words of Don Juan came somewhat hoarsely through the thin wood. "It is but a matter of business, but the way he looks at you! Some day soon I will kill Big Jim."

"That mutton-head!"—scornfully. "Some night the police will catch him and shoot him for you. His eyes are the eyes of a love-sick calf, and for you, my heart, I have pulled the wool over them. . . ."

It was then that Big Jim yelled. One lunge of his shoulder gained him entrance past a splintered door. And the rest of it was all confusion, with Lupe coming up from Don Juan's lap her hand holding a dagger, and Don Juan, a bit muddled, reaching for his money belt instead of for the holstered guns that lay with his shell belts across the bed. Big Jim had his own gun clear and promptly took a shot at Don Juan, but Lupe and her slashing dagger ruined his aim and several inches of his hide as well. By that time men were yelling, boots coming on the run. Big Jim snatched up Don Juan's money belt and backed out the door with it.

Minutes later, a big buckskin, with his rider hugging his neck, crashed through the switch mesquite that fringed the Rio Grande's south bank. The slap of his lathered belly sent brown water splashing high. The buckskin's head came up, and he was swimming, with bullets skipping off the water on either side and whining on toward Texas.

From the Mexico side, as the winded buckskin found footing, came frustrated yells.

The buckskin's scrambling forefeet reached the Texas bank. He gave one more great surging leap before the strength poured out of him. Big Jim stepped smartly from saddle as the poor beast collapsed, his eyes flicking from the thorny brush of the higher bank to the bloodweeds nearer at hand. He dived headlong into the weeds. There, flat on his belly, he hauled himself around and reached out a cautious hand to pull the carbine from the saddle boot of his dead horse. Grinning like a wolf, he slid the carbine into comfortable position across the horse's shoulder and waited.

A GROUP of horsemen had appeared on the far bank, and, without dismounting, were setting carbine stocks to shoulder in business-like fashion. Presently leaden hornets came whipping and snapping through the bloodweeds, searching for the hiding place of Big Jim.

Don Juan himself, in boots and long underwear, topped by a short black jacket heavy with gold braid—all the clothes he had taken time to grab—stood up in the stirrups and yelled for Big Jim to come out and trade lead.

"*Valgame,* Don Jaime! You hide in the weeds like a rabbit!"

Big Jim's carbine barked wickedly, and the flat-crowned hat jumped backward on Don Juan's head; whereupon that pantsless dandy promptly yanked his horse about and spurred for the cover of the switch mesquite, close followed by his men.

"The next time, you brown-skinned babboon," Big Jim yelled across the water, "I'll lower my sights a notch!"

After a time—fully fifteen minutes—Big Jim got to his feet and looked ruefully at his dead horse.

"Somebody will pay for that buckskin," he muttered. "Good swimmer he was, too. But I'll get me another one."

Big Jim was slogging in his wet boots up the riverbank, carrying his saddle and carbine and the moneybelt that held a hundred golden double eagles, when the bitter thought came to him. He was a hunted man, wanted on both sides of the river. And none of it was any fault of his. Because, returning home from the war, he had killed a carpetbagger who had stolen his ranch and murdered his old friend, the State Police were looking for him. Because he had let Lupe Cordova, with her husky voice and her red lips, pull the wool over his eyes, he was no longer welcome in Mexico, either. So what was there left for him? Where could he go?

Big Jim held no great love for Mexico; but Texas—why, shucks, he'd been born here! Like his granddaddy who had fought at San Jacinto, and his father, Sam Houston Jerico, who had died in an Indian fight near Bastrop, Big Jim wanted to serve Texas. And he had served Texas. For four bitter long years he had fought the damn yankees, and now—

Big Jim thought of Lieutenant Fox and the State Police, and the bitterness bit into him like an auger in his heart. He was all through with running! If fighting Lieutenant Fox meant fighting Texas, then he intended to fight! But before he did anything else, he had to get himself a horse. . . .

Big Jim traveled slowly, painfully, on foot, keeping to the brush with a sharp eye out for

anything that moved. The sun grew to a ball of fire, passed its zenith and dipped westward, leaving Big Jim, now stumbling in boots that felt like they were of blistering sheetiron, wondering with each torturing mile that passed just how it was that he had come to such a sorry pass. Where in hell's hinges had that shack of Whispering Davis moved to?

Big Jim, coming at last to the edge of a meager clearing, was disappointed after his first quick glance at the small adobe and the pack-pole corral that flanked the building. Whispering Davis was at home, all right. A dribble of smoke came from the chimney. But all the corral held was a mule—a sore-backed one, at that.

BIG JIM whistled and almost immediately Whispering Davis was at the door, his hands holding a rifle. Big Jim stepped from the brush. Then, remembering that the old gentleman's eyesight wasn't much stronger than his voice, he sang out hurriedly, "It's me—Jim Jerico."

"Big Jim? Git inside this house, boy! With the State Police pokin' their noses ever'whar, a honest man don't know what to expect." And as Big Jim approached: "Boy, you look peaked! Like you could use a drink, or maybe some vittles."

Big Jim didn't wait for a second invitation. He started with four fingers of red whiskey, and washed down frijoles and corn pone with black coffee, strong as lye. When he had finished, he shoved back from the table and rolled a brown-paper cigarette.

"Now, boy," his host asked in a hoarse whisper, "how come? Last I heard, the State Police had done run you to Mexico. Spill it, boy. You in trouble?"

"*Trouble*," Big Jim said bitterly, and went on to relate the whole sorry story. Lieutenant Fox, he declared, was at the bottom of it all. And before he remembered that Whispering Davis was from the North himself, and had once, so the talk went, been a Yankee spy, Big Jim paid Lieutenant Fox a few highly-flavored compliments. He wondered, now, if the lieutenant was still in these parts.

"Big as sin and twice as ugly," his host whispered, and his small blue eyes, watching Big Jim, glittered in the failing light like agate marbles. "He's got twenty policemen to reinforce him, and he's combed the bresh for you with a fine-toothed comb. Says he aims to stay till he ketches you, and hangs you to the highest limb he can find. What you aim to do about it, boy?"

"I'll 'tend to that rooster," Big Jim promised. "First, I got to get me a horse."

"You shouldn't have done it, Jim. I got a good mule I'll loan you, but you shouldn't have come back. Jim boy, you can't fight twenty State Policemen. Not out in the open."

"How else would I fight 'em?" Big Jim growled.

"There's ways, boy, there's allus ways. Hear about what happened to yo' black boy?" His eyes, across the table, were sly. "Makes yo' blood boil that such a thing could happen."

"You mean Link? What—?"

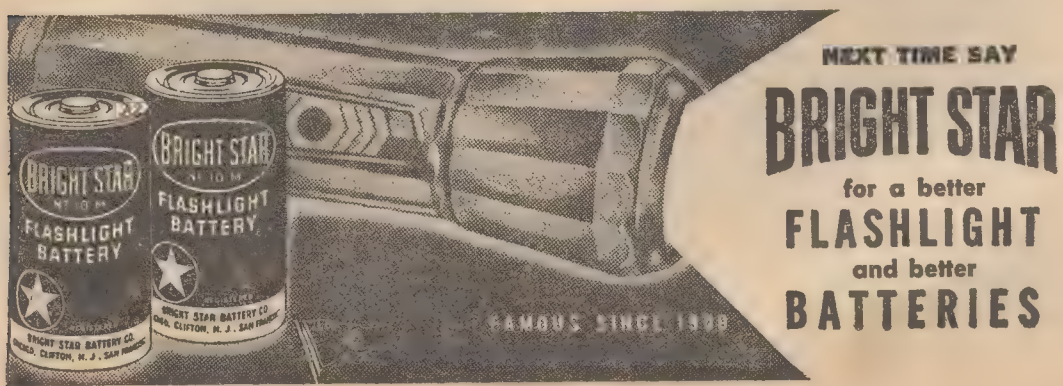
"Why, Lieutenant Fox arrested him for helpin' you to escape. Fetched him to the jail at Dog Town—and somewhar on the way Link got beat up. Laid there for weeks more dead than alive, and he's still in a bad way. That's the kind—Jim! Hold on, boy, where you headin'?"

"To Dog Town," said Big Jim. "I'll get there even on yo' sorry sore-backed mule, and I'll show those police roosters something never taught in books. Whuppin' that black boy of mine!"

Big Jim, at the door, pulled up short and stared. Through the night shadows that were shrouding the mesquite came a dozen riders—strange appearing riders clad in long white garments.

The shivery voice of Whispering Davis spoke at Big Jim's shoulder.

"I told you there was ways, boy. Those are friends of mine—of yores, too, if you want it



that way. Wait till you talk to the high mogul."

CHAPTER THREE

When Gun-Ghosts Ride

SO IT was that Big Jim Jerico, somewhat surprised at himself, with the bitterness still gnawing at him, found himself riding through the night on a sore-backed mule. Whispering Davis had furnished him with a sheet-like garment, and Big Jim had been accepted as a member of the white-shrouded band he now rode with.

A few doubts troubled Big Jim, but he shrugged them off. Could be that he had jumped into this thing too quick. Save for Whispering Davis, Big Jim knew none of the white-garbed men who rode beside him—or if he did know them, he had failed to recognize them.

Their leader, the High Mogul, was the only one who had spoken a word, and his voice, coming through the white cloth, had been muffled, unrecognizable. On the other hand, Big Jim thought, it was likely that all of the men knew him. Big Jim wondered, too, about the errand they were on. The boss, huge beneath his white sheet, had been vague if not evasive.

"Little matter of a cow-thievin' carpet-bagger. Brother, you ride with us—prove that you're in good faith. Then we'll see about your colored boy. It's your choice. Ride with the Three K's or buck the State Police—alone." His voice was harsh, twanging, and, somehow, familiar to big Jim.

"I'll ride with you," Big Jim had told him promptly. "No man or body of men is gunna run me out of Texas—not again. But I'd feel a heap better if we all came out in the open, and left off these white duds."

Big Jim thought of Sudden Jim's words, of his scorn for the night riding bands, and was glad that his partner couldn't see him now. But let him get Link out of jail, and settle his score with that renegade, Lieutenant Fox, and he would be through with this sneaky business once and for all.

Steady beat of hoofs in the night, the scratch of brush, the creak of saddle leather. . . . Big Jim, deep in his gloomy thoughts, paid little heed to direction or distance; he knew this stretch of mesquite and *tornillo* and cactus like the palm of his hand.

Thinking his somber thoughts, Big Jim wished mightily that Sudden Jim could be beside him now. Sudden Jim, and the Two Jim crew. . . .

They were nearing Branch Oliver's place, but this couldn't be their destination. That salty old-timer might fight a man at the drop of a hat, or he might ride twenty miles through a blue norther to pay back a borrowed pound of coffee. But he was certainly no cattle thief. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Texan, "born in a Texas wagon and raised a-straddle of a mustang," who had lost two sons in the war.

Big Jim, remembering the time Missus Oliver had nursed Sudden Jim's Lolita through a siege of pneumonia, knew that he would always have a soft spot in his heart for that good woman—for her man and all her tribe. Big Jim, in fact, was in no way prepared for the swift and tragic events that crowded upon him.

For, instead of riding on past, at the edge of the Oliver clearing the sheeted band split and drew rein only when the house was surrounded. There was no discussion, no hesitation. Two of the band, the leader and another, dismounted and took station, one on each side of the cabin's front door. The cabin was dark and no man spoke. The silence ran unbroken save for the frantic barking of Branch Oliver's dogs.

Big Jim could imagine old Branch, in there with his wife and his flock of kids, straining his ears in the darkness and wondering what ailed Ring and old Spot. Something like fear laid hold of Big Jim, and he wanted to shout a warning. But at that moment Branch Oliver, in his underwear, appeared at the door holding a rifle.

"Spot! Ring! Stop that bellerin'!"

Seeing nothing to alarm him, the oldster stepped down to the mesquite-log step, and that was his undoing. For he glimpsed the ghostly shapes to left and right of him, and was whipping up his rifle when the men on either side of the door closed in on him. One of them clubbed the old man with a pistol butt, the other caught him before he could fall. The rest of it was something Big Jim Jerico hoped never to see again.

They dragged the half-conscious oldster to a big mesquite where chickens roosted in front of his shack. They put a noose around his neck while two of the white-sheeted band held him erect and another hooded figure tossed the rope's end over a stout limb.

From the front door Maw Oliver yelled at them. "You cowardly varmints, leave my man be!"

She held a shotgun and tried to use it, but others of the band had entered by the back door. She was yanked backward as her finger pulled trigger, and the charge from the shotgun went whistling harmlessly through the upper branches of the mesquites. More men came from the house herding before them the children of Branch Oliver, almost a dozen of them, rubbing sleep from their eyes. Young Branch, who was about fourteen, saw his father with the rope around his neck, and squalled like a wildcat.

"What you doin' to my paw? Ring—Spot—sic 'em!"

He made a desperate grab for the gun a white-sheeted man near him held, but another of the men slapped out with a gun barrel and knocked him sprawling.

But what got under Big Jim's skin the most was the burning house. He had missed that part of it, didn't know the house had been fired until the crackling of flames drew his attention. Then the smell of the burning mesquite logs came to his nostrils, and he saw red tongues of fire licking up from the back wall. He had got off the borrowed mule, and was standing near Branch Oliver. In the red glow from the burning building, he saw the stricken, hopeless look on the old-timer's weathered face, and never had he felt so helpless.

OLD Branch Oliver and his brood had been the Two Jims' first neighbors. Happy that their womenfolk would have a neighbor woman to visit with in this lonesome country, the Two Jims had helped Branch Oliver in every way they could. Big Jim himself had helped to cut the big mesquite logs for Branch Oliver's house, and now. . . . Big Jim saw Maw Oliver run inside the blazing building. He heard old Branch's agonized shout: "Maw! Maw, come back!"

All of the walls were blazing now, and at any moment the sod and brush roof would give way. Big Jim found himself at the front door, with smoke choking him and intolerable heat beating against him. Behind him he heard angry yells, but he plunged on into the swirling fog of smoke and he was coughing and choking and yelling, "Miz Oliver, Miz Oliver!"

Later, the whole thing was like a nightmare. The searing heat was worse than onion juice in his eyes. Then he saw the crumpled form of Maw Oliver on the rammed-earth floor, with her head, as if on a pillow, resting on the few clothes and other belongings she had bundled up inside a blanket. Big Jim never saw her until he stumbled over her. And he never did know how he got Maw Oliver, her belongings and her blanket out of that place. He remembered stumbling with a burden in his arms that felt heavy as the whole world. He remembered the stroke of cool air against his face. He remembered someone yelling, "There goes the roof!" and for a time all went black.

At first Big Jim paid no attention to the voices, for his mind seemed to float away from its surroundings and a great wonderment grew upon him. Those stories his father and his grandfather used to tell, of the fight for the cannon at Gonzales, of the men who died in the Alamo, of that glorious day when Sam Houston's men bled and fought and won the future of Texas—all of these things ran crazily through Big Jim's mind.

And now he, Big Jim Jerico, had ridden with this cowardly shrouded band, and thinking of it, Big Jim felt empty inside. His shame grew upon him, and because the love for Texas was rooted deep in his soul and he felt that, somehow, he had let Texas down, tears came into his eyes.

Big Jim's weakness soon passed, but the shame stayed with him like a knot in his chest, and from that kernel his wrath began growing. It was a cold and merciless wrath, at himself and at these night riders who had tricked him, and he pushed up on one arm and felt for his gun.

Like fantastic figures out of a nightmare, the hooded men surrounded old Branch Oliver. The flickering glow from the burning cabin bathed the white garments in red. It revealed the eyes of Branch Oliver, contemptuous and unafraid, staring at his captors out of a gaunt face that seemed to taunt them. It revealed the frightened huddle of touseled heads and thin figures with staring eyes, a little to one side, that was Maw Oliver and her brood.

The leader of the white-sheeted band was speaking, his words coming through the cloth that covered his face with a peculiar twang that nagged at Big Jim's memory.

"You know why we're here, Branch Oliver," the man was saying. "You were heard to blaspheme against the State of Texas and against the men who enforce its laws. You said the State Legislature was a bunch of sneaking curs. You said the State Police were thieving scalawags that ought to be run out of the country. On top of that, you're charged with stealing cattle from your neighbor, Jim Whip. If you have anything to say—"

"You got it backwards," Branch Oliver cut in tauntingly. "It was the Legislature I said was a bunch of blue-nosed damn yankees that would steal the clo'es off a poor widder woman's back, and the State Po-lice I called a pack of mongrel flea-bit hounds. Any real Texan, I said, could run a hundred of 'em back to Austin with their tails tucked and yelpin' every jump. That was right after the noble Po-lice snuck up and tried to arrest my neighbor, Big Jim.

"But the real reason you fellers are here is because I seen you white-livered gents, kivvered in yo' white sheets, stealin' a bunch of the Two Jims' cattle. I heared you go by and I follered. I recognized some of you, too, so you aim to kill me. Law and order! Why, you low-down sorry crawlin' sons, when Big Jim Jerico gits back from Mexico—!"

The rest of it happened fast. At a signal from the leader, a hooded rider started his horse. The rope that led from his saddle horn,

over the mesquite limb and to the noose that encircled Branch Oliver's seamy neck, went taut. Branch Oliver's words choked off, and his work-toughened body rose kicking into the air. Maw Oliver screamed. The two dogs set up a baying, the younger children began sniffling, while the older ones sobbed and cried. And above these sounds rose the booming wrathful voice of Big Jim.

"Turn and take it, you *pelicanos!* I rode heah with you, but I ain't ridin' back. Not many of you's gunna do *any* ridin' back!"

Then men in white sheets were whirling, cursing, grabbing for their guns. They found themselves facing what must have looked like a great white bear—a bear reared up on its hind legs, bellowing and roaring its wrath, nursing near its belly an old .44 that looked big as a cannon.

CHAPTER FOUR

McNelly

SUDDEN JIM WHIP knew nothing of this. Sudden Jim, heading home from Dog Town with the Two Jim crew, was deep in his own somber thoughts. Since that night when Big Jim had fled to Mexico things had gone badly on the Two Jim ranch, and on the surrounding country as well. First, learning of the beating the State Police had given poor Link, Sudden Jim had ridden to town. He had talked with Lieutenant Fox, had offered to go Link's bail—all the while striving to hold his temper reined in. But when Fox had refused to release Link, had laughed and made his brags right in Sudden Jim's face, it had been too much. When the State Policeman picked himself up from the floor, where Sudden Jim's slashing gun barrel had dumped him, Sudden Jim and his men were breaking down the door of the jailhouse. They took Link out of there, and hit saddle, and never stopped riding until they reached the Two Jim ranch.

Two days later, Sudden Jim heard that Lieutenant Fox had placed the county under martial law. Sudden Jim was sent word that he and his friends could escape court martial only by paying one hundred dollars for each day martial law was in force, and it would remain in force until both Big Jim and Sudden Jim rode in to Dog Town and surrendered to the law. It was bitter news to swallow, because Sudden Jim felt that he and Big Jim were responsible for the trouble, and he hated to have his friends to suffer. But Sudden Jim was a fighter. He sent word back to Lieutenant Fox that Big Jim was in Mexico, that he, Sudden Jim, was at the ranch, and that if the lieutenant wanted him he knew just where to find him.

Meanwhile, the white-sheeted band rode the land. A Mexican rancher was found hanged beside his burned ranch house, with a note pinned to his chest that bore the scrawled message: "Mexicans and Negroes be warned! This is white man's country. You git out!" Over on the Sausalita, Pete Kenney lost a hundred head of cattle, while down on the Puerco Tod Albritton lost all his horse stock in a single night. Sudden Jim himself began to miss cattle, rumor followed rumor, and men slept at night behind barred doors.

The entire brush country was set to explode, and so ugly was the situation that—so rumor went—Captain McNelly, who was no carpet-bagger or scalawag but a real fighting man, was being sent down from Austin to take charge.

Honest, innocent men were suffering. Blood had been shed and more of it would be. And Sudden Jim felt as though he and Big Jim were somehow to blame for it all. Such was the situation on this night when Whispering Davis appeared at the Two Jims' ranch house with a strange tale to tell Sudden Jim.

Big Jim, he said, was not in Mexico at all. Big Jim, that very evening, had come to his place, and while he was talking to Big Jim a bunch of men wearing white sheets had ridden from the brush. He had loaned Big Jim his old mule to ride, and the whole kit and kaboodle of them had headed for town. He didn't know what to make of it, but it looked bad, what with all the talk of Big Jim's joining up with the bandit, Cortinas, and rnning guns across the Border. . . .

"You mean to tell me," demanded Sudden Jim, "that my pardner's ridin' with the Ku Klux?"

"He rode off with 'em," Whispering Davis repeated. "He sho'ly did."

"Yo're a liar!" exploded Sudden Jim. "I'll choke the truth out of you."

But Whispering Davis was expecting some such move. He dodged nimbly around the rump of his horse, and was clawing at his saddle pocket when Sudden Jim's hand clamped his shoulder and whirled him about. His voice rose in a hoarse cry of protest.

"Wait, boy, wait!" He waved a crushed hat before Sudden Jim's wrathful eyes. "You recognize this! You see I ain't lyin'! Big Jim left this hat at my place. He left it there when he put on that white sheet. You see, boy, you see?"

"I see it's the hat Big Jim wore to Mexico," Sudden Jim clipped. "That don't prove a thing!"

He went running toward the corral, yelling at his men in the bunkhouse to saddle up.

"Wait, boy," the croaking voice of Whispering Davis followed him. "What you aim to do?"

"Head for town," said Sudden Jim grimly. "If yo're lyin' like I think, I aim to cut out yo' Yankee gizzard and feed it to the dogs!"

Satisfaction gleamed through the fear in Whispering Davis' eyes. Things were working out—high stakes, dangerous stakes, but worth it.

THE Two Jims' ranch was the largest and best stocked in the country. A good market for cattle was opening up in Mexico. The Rio Grande was handy. Remained but to get the Two Jims out of the way. The Two Jims were tough customers—but with a setup like his bunch had worked out! Whispering Davis grinned slyly.

Carpetbaggers, were they? That's what these slow-witted Texans called men like him, men from the North, men with the brains to skim the cream off the cattle business and with the guts to do it with. They called Governor Pease a scalawag, and called his State Police worse. But the drawling scoundrels would learn a trick or two! Southern men got up the Ku Klux to fight carpetbag rule, and smart men from every State turned that white-sheeted organization to their own advantage. They got up their own white-sheeted bands, and what they wanted they took, whether it was legal or illegal, and the Ku Klux Klan got the blame for it.

They'd made a slip, the night Big Jim Jerico eluded the State Police. He himself had given Lieutenant Fox the exact layout of the Two Jims' ranch headquarters, told him just where Big Jim's bedroom was. They'd planned to throw Big Jim in jail, knowing that Sudden Jim would never let his partner stay there. The Negro boy, Link, with the help of Sudden Jim, had spoiled that plan. But it had worked out just as well. For after tonight, there wouldn't be any Two Jims. There'd be only one Jim to contend with. Big Jim would be dead and branded a coward and a murderer, and Sudden Jim would be tarred with the same stick. A white sheet with blood on it would be found at the Two Jims' ranch, and the whole country would think that Sudden Jim had helped his partner and the white-sheeted band to murder old Branch Oliver.

It certainly had given old Whispering Davis a shock when Big Jim showed up from Mexico, but quick brainwork had turned the thing to advantage. He'd fired Big Jim up with that tale about how the police had mistreated his colored boy, Link. Then he had simply put on his white duds and asked Big Jim to step outside a moment, told him the Three K's had to take a secret ballot before admitting him to membership. Big Jim had swallowed it all. When Big Jim stepped back inside, old Whispering Davis was already on his way to the Two Jims' ranch, riding the fast horse he always kept handy hidden in the brush. Big Jim would never miss him, one man out of the whole white-sheeted bunch.

That Lieutenant Fox, though—a good man, a mighty good man! After this night, he'd make short work of Sudden Jim Whip. . . .

So ran the scheming mind of Whispering Davis. But if sight of Big Jim, appearing so unexpectedly at his ranch, had been a shock to him, he was due for a worse one. For in Dog Town, that night, they met the man who had been sent down from Austin to replace Lieutenant Fox.

That first meeting between Sudden Jim and Captain McNelly occurred in the Eagle Saloon, where Sudden Jim went seeking news of Big Jim. The men gathered there were men who had been friends of the Two Jims, who had looked upon them as leaders. But not one of them spoke or nodded a greeting when Sudden Jim stepped into the room. Whispering Davis, who was with Sudden Jim, held back a grin.

They made their way to the bar through a cold silence, and they pulled up beside old Diamond D Jennison. Sudden Jim announced that he'd buy a drink, old Diamond D turned his back, and that started it. For Sudden Jim reached out with a rough hand, and hauled the old ranchman around to face him.

"You can skip the drink, Jennison," he stated coldly. "All I want of you is some information."

"Take yo' hand off me or you'll get more than you ask for," the old ranchman returned just as coldly. "You and yo' pardner's been too high-handed already. Thanks to you, we're under martial law. This county has been assessed a fine of fifty thousand dollars, and property owners like me has to pay it out in a three per cent tax. One of my riders, young Sunny Tolbert, was killed, the State Police are patrollin' the town, and all because yore pardner and you hold no respect for the law!"

While old man Jennison was talking, men in the room had gathered behind him, their eyes ugly. Hands were reaching for gun butts, and cold anger was building up inside Sudden Jim. He might be to blame for some of this trouble, he and Big Jim, but he wasn't used to this sort of talk. And he wasn't taking it!

"I'm askin' you a civil question, Jennison. You're going to answer it," he said. And at the flat sound of his voice, Whispering Davis skipped to one side, out of the possible line of fire.

"He only wants to know about Big Jim," Whispering Davis croaked. "Thats all, Jennison. Somebuddy said Big Jim was ridin' with the Ku Klux, and—"

"You said it, damn you!" Sudden Jim rasped. His hand moved swiftly, and his gun was clearing leather when a slow, drawling

voice smote his ear. He stiffened at the sound.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Gunplay never paid anyone but the undertaker, and I'm here to prevent that. Put up yo' weapons." And when some men hesitated: "Put 'em up!"

THE man was so slender that he looked tall, almost effeminate. His neat beard was crinkly and black against the blue of his uniform, and there was nothing about him, except maybe his black unwinking eyes, that was at all out of the ordinary. But those black eyes were watching Sudden Jim, and after bearing their scrutiny for a moment, Sudden Jim let his gun chug back into leather. Those eyes gave a man the shivers.

The stranger in the uniform of the State Police said that looked better, and a hint of humor crinkled his eyes. "I'm lookin' foh Sudden Jim Whip, and if I make no mistake, I'm lookin' at him now."

"Right you are, seh"—Sudden Jim matched the man's drawl. "And anything special that you want, I'll be glad to oblige."

"Now, now, seh. Is that any way to speak to Captain McNelly of the State Police? I'd like to know what all this ruffled feathers business is about."

Sudden Jim told him everything, especially how the State Police had mauled the colored boy, Link, and hauled him off to jail.

"I offered bail, and I took him out of there. And I'd do it again," Sudden Jim finished grimly. "And I won't pay a plugged nickel of the fine they slapped on me. This carpet-baggin' rooster"—glaring at Whispering Davis—"claims Big Jim is back from Mexico, that he's ridin' with the white-sheets. Me, I don't believe a word of it, but until I find my pardner and talk to him, I'm not about to even make a dicker with the State Police!"

Sudden Jim said the last words with his gun in his hand, backing toward the door. And right then he found out what manner of man this Captain McNelly was. For McNelly spoke softly, to someone whose boots scraped the floor behind Sudden Jim. He murmured, "You, Fox, put up that gun!" The reflexes of Sudden Jim whirled him half around, and to his chagrin, he saw Red and Rowdy Burke, his own men, coming through the door. He whirled back to find himself staring into the muzzle of McNelly's gun. Above the weapon, the eyes of Captain McNelly were as steady, as black, as the muzzle of the gun he held.

"Now," he said, "we've both got one. Now maybe you'll let me ride along with you, peaceable-like."

"You mean you're not tryin' to arrest me?"

"Not for the present, Sudden Jim. You see, I want to talk with that pardner of yours, too, and I figure that trailin' with you is the quickest way to find him. I've got some words for yo' friend Fox, too, when I can lay hands on him. Governor Pease is going out of office, next election. The State Police force is due for a new deal, and I aim to have a hand in it. We're going to be called Rangers, and I hope to God that, instead of being the laughing stock, we'll be the pride of Texas! Where do we find Big Jim?"

For a long moment, Sudden Jim studied the man. Then he holstered his gun, and McNelly was just as quick to holster his.

"I believe you'll give Big Jim and me, everybody concerned a square deal," Sudden Jim said. "Come on. We'll go to the ranch first. If Big Jim's in this country, he'll have been there."

He put a cold glance on Whispering Davis, who was edging toward the back door. "My promise to you still holds, Mister. You come along, too."

CHAPTER FIVE

Texans Never Die!

FEAR rode with Whispering Davis on that headlong rush through the night. He cursed McNelly. He cursed Lieutenant Fox for not warning him about the man. . . . But maybe, he thought, things might yet work out as planned. By this time, the boys should be through at Branch Oliver's. And finding Big Jim there, in his white sheet—McNelly wouldn't trust Sudden Jim, either, after that. If the boys had finished at Oliver's. Sudden Jim, damn him, had to ride like the devil was on his tail!

They reached the Puerco and hammered on across. They reached the forks, where the trail branched, and Sudden Jim held up a hand, stood in the stirrups and peered toward Branch Oliver's. A faint red glow showed on the skyline.

"Brush fire," whispering Davis croaked nervously.

"And maybe a set fire. Looks like my neighbor's place," Sudden Jim said grimly. "Come on!"

They covered a mile with the wind whipping past their ears, the thorny brush tearing at their clothes. They topped a brushy ridge, and abruptly Sudden Jim stopped. Below them was the cabin of Branch Oliver, what was left of it, and as they gazed down at the blazing house, a giant white-sheeted figure came staggering out of it, carrying a woman and a bulky bundle in the circle of big arms. The big ghostly figure ran a few lurching steps, then fell, just as the sod roof of the burning shack crashed in, sending up a bright shower of sparks.

All of them, from the ridge top, had seen that giant figure come staggering out of the

doomed house. Sudden Jim had seen it. Whispering Davis had seen it—and Whispering Davis was struck through with stark fear. There was no mistaking the bigness of Big Jim. Something, Whispering Davis thought miserably, had gone wrong. Big Jim was still alive. The job wasn't finished.

The wooden tone of Sudden Jim, when he spoke an order, betrayed his feelings in the matter.

"Leave the horses here. We got to get there fast and quiet. Leg it, men!"

They tied their horses, and set out down the slope afoot, avoiding the thorny scratching branches, making as little noise as possible in the thick mesquite. McNelly, beside Sudden Jim, noted the set look on his face.

"Looks like the Ku Klux done this," he said softly. "That big one—he look like yo' pardner, Whip?"

"If it was, he's no pardner of mine," Sudden Jim returned harshly.

They reached the edge of brush that surrounded the clearing, and there McNelly took charge. His face, in the red light that filtered through the rim of undergrowth, no longer looked effeminate. It was stern and hard as if chiselled from granite. For the scene in the clearing needed no explanation. A dozen ghostly white figures surrounded old Branch Oliver, who stood under a big mesquite, ramrod straight, with the noose around his neck. Here, closer to the edge of the clearing, huddled Maw Oliver and her frightened children, while just beyond them one of the shrouded men sat his horse, ready to drive in spurs and tighten the rope which would lift Branch Oliver into eternity.

One of the white-robed men was talking to Branch Oliver, telling him how he had blasphemed against the State, cursed the police and stolen the Two Jims' cattle—and McNelly, listening, quickly put up his hand for quiet.

"Hold it, men," he murmured. "Let's hear what we can."

So they heard the whole thing. They heard Branch Oliver's taunting reply, heard him accuse the white-sheeted band of doing the stealing of the Two Jims' cattle, on their own account. And then, so quickly that McNelly himself was almost caught unprepared, the mounted man kicked his horse forward, and Branch Oliver was lifted into the air. The giant white-sheeted figure that could only be Big Jim was lifting to its legs like a great white bear, shouting and rumbling in wrath.

"Turn and take it, you *pelicanos*. . . . !"

A knife flashed in McNelly's hand as he ran toward the struggling figure of Branch Oliver.

AT Sudden Jim's ear a gun exploded. He saw Whispering Davis, scuttling desperately through the brush, throw up both hands and plunge forward on his face. He heard the voice of Rowdy Burke raised in satisfaction.

"That's one good carpetbagger!"

Sudden Jim stood still for two beats of his heart, watching Big Jim. He saw the white-sheeted men whirling to face Big Jim, saw them clawing frantically for their guns. He saw the guns flash clear, a dozen of them, and he saw Big Jim waddling forward into those blazing guns, waddling clumsily in the sheet that covered him, cursing the men before him, taunting them.

"Diddle me, will you? Trick me into sneakin' through the night in a damn sheet! Burn my neighbor's house! By the grace of old Sam Houston, you'll never do it again! Them I don't git, my pardner will! Take it, damn you!"

Big Jim rocked back as lead hit him, then

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he was moving forward again, slowly, grimly.

Sudden Jim didn't know what it was all about. He saw men falling. He saw his partner here dressed in a shameful white garment. And suddenly he knew he didn't give a thin whoop in hell what his partner had on, what he was doing here now, or what he was about to do next. Big Jim was his partner. He was the biggest, bravest man that ever walked, and if a blamed fool named Sudden Jim could make it that far, he was going to side his partner!

"Mow 'em down, Big Jim," he yelled. "Pardner, I'm a-coming!"

It didn't last long after that, with Big Jim slinging lead in the faces of the white-sheeted band, Sudden Jim cutting loose behind them, and McNelly and the Two Jim crew closing in on both sides. It was swift, and lethal.

The last man to drop was the leader, who had been talking so big to Branch Oliver. The big fellow's gun snapped empty. He hurled the weapon at Big Jim, who was sinking to his knees, and he yelled frantically, "Pelzer!" When there was no answer, he started running. But he made the mistake of running past the spot where Branch Oliver, cut from the hang tree by Captain McNelly, was trying to sit up. A gun some man had dropped lay close to old Branch's hand, and he came up with it, squinted one eye, and let drive. The slug caught the running man square between the shoulders.

Sudden Jim was down beside Big Jim, tearing the sheet from him, crying, "Jim, Jim, how bad you hit? You hurt bad, old hoss? Say something, Jim!"

"Lemme be," growled Big Jim, shaking him off. "I ain't hurt much, just nicked here and there." He was feeling of his middle parts, staring ruefully at a scattering of gold double eagles on the ground near him. "Danged *perosotes,* that last shot knocked the wind outa me. Thought I was a gone goose. It sure played hell with Don Juan's fancy money-belt!"

On his all-fours he went crawling, strewing gold double eagles as he went, shaking himself now and then to make the yield more liberal. "Leave 'em there for old Branch's kids to find. Sorta repay 'em for the things they lost."

He stopped beside the white-sheeted figure of the man old Branch had shot. He ripped the sheet away from the man's face, and grunted in satisfaction.

"I thought so! When he yelled for his big Dutchman, I knew it."

"A nice set-up," said Sudden Jim. "What devilment he couldn't work in the name of the State Police, he carried on with the white-sheets. They aimed to leave you here dead, pardner—aimed to tie me in with the murder of Branch Oliver, too. With us out of the way, they'd have stripped our ranch clean."

The Two Jims looked up to see the shocked face of Captain McNelly.

"WITH a new governor comin' in, he knew his time was short," McNelly told them. "So he and his carpet-baggin' friends here planned this deal. But gentlemen, we're due for a new deal all around. I've heard enough to clear you both on all except the old murder charge, and I promise you, Big Jim, that you'll have a fast, fair hearin' on that. And I promise you both that our new organization, the Rangers, will be something the whole of Texas will be proud of!"

McNelly stooped and pulled the sheet back over the dead face of Lieutenant Fox.

The face of Big Jim had gone long and solemn. He addressed Sudden Jim.

"Reckon, after this night, you'll be huntin' a new pardner. You see that can settin' yander on the stump? Whole hog or none, Jim. My ranch or yores."

He tried to lift his pistol, finally grasped the butt with both hands, and tilted the weapon high enough to blast holes in the moon. The strength was running out of him, and his ears must have been failing. The gun emitted no sound save a metallic click.

"Missed! Can you imagine that? She's yo' ranch, pardner, and yo' cattle."

Sudden Jim made no move to lift his gun. "You old mossyhorn," he growled, "it's the Two Jims' cattle. The Two Jims' outfit. This is one time I'm not even going to gamble."

Big Jim sat up straighter, his eyes suddenly bright. "You mean—Jim, me a-settin' here in this danged white sheet, and you still want me for a *pardner*?"

"Any man," said Sudden Jim, "can make a mistake. But no man I know could make up for one like you did tonight. You pulled Maw Oliver out of that blazin' house. You reared up on yo' hind legs and shot it out with that whole sneakin' outfit. You—pardner, you're about the—" Sudden Jim swallowed. "Aw, blast you, roll over and lemme stop that blood. If you ain't dead, you ought to be!"

Obediently, Big Jim rolled over. He shut his eyes, and he kept muttering, "The Two Jims, the Two Jims. . . ."

Big Jim came out of the blackness to find himself in the jolting bed of a wagon, staring up into the concerned, lovely face of Sudden Jim's sister, Jenna.

"Jenna," he asked solemnly, "did you ever carry a dagger in yo' garter?"

When Jenna shook a startled head, Big Jim smiled. "That's fine!" he said, and shut his eyes again.

THE END

Hell-Horse From Heaven

By JOHN RICHARD YOUNG

The boss wrangler vowed: "I'll bust that halfbreed jackass, or kill him!" . . . But any buster loco enough to try it on that buckskin bombshell, Umatilla Blue, was living on borrowed time!

He was perhaps the most thoroughly hated horse that ever lived.

I WONDER how many men who remember when rodeo broncs were saddled in the arena, instead of in chutes, can recall Umatilla Blue? I wonder whether any man who may remember him has ever asked himself, "What made that buckskin chunk of dynamite tick? How did he get that way?"

I doubt it. I doubt that anyone remembers Umatilla Blue at all. He was the kind of horse that bronc riders prefer to forget.

He was a chunky little fellow even as a colt, with an ugly roman-nosed head and oversize hairy hoofs that betrayed his bronco blood. In color he was the drabest of the drab—a mousey buckskin with a black stripe down his back and another stripe across his withers from shoulder to shoulder so that the two lines formed, symbolically perhaps, a cross. Only his eyes ever won him a second glance.

His eyes were a startling china-blue, and very small, like those of a mule or a wild ass. At night they shone with a diabolical, phosphorescent gleam. A long black forelock fell down between those glassy blue eyes so that

the horse appeared to be always furtively peeking at the world from behind a mask.

His dam was a trigger-tempered three-quarters Thoroughbred with the blood of Peter McCue, the greatest quarter horse that ever ran, in her veins. She had the buckskin colt running at her side when she was captured after two years of outlawdom as a member of the harem of a wild stallion in the Umatilla Horse Heaven country in Oregon. The colt was as different from his dam as if they were of separate breeds. No one doubted that the wild stallion was his sire.

He was perhaps the most thoroughly hated horse that ever lived. When he was first turned loose in a pasture with other yearlings, his fellow-colts unanimously greeted him with a barrage of hoofs and teeth. Several young aristocrats, ganging up, mauled him with such uncoltish savagery that a horse-wrangler had to rescue him.

For the little buckskin, brave to the point of suicide, stubbornly stood his ground. He seemed only astonished and bewildered by the beating he received.

He learned, though; learned the hard way. When, during blazing mid-summer noons, the other horses dozed together in the shade, or, in blizzards, when they huddled together for warmth, if he even tried to approach, however unobtrusively, the little fellow found himself facing a solid phalanx of threatening heels.

Often, for no apparent reason, several horses, as if at a signal, would attack him together. But always the little guy stood his ground. He took an ungodly amount of punishment, but he never flinched, and he learned to dish it out. And he made up in speed and courage all that he lacked in size.

Yet, as even his most furtively friendly advances evoked the same unfriendly rebuffs, gradually the dim realization forced itself into the blue-eyed buckskin's mind that for some puzzling reason he was a pariah, hated and shunned by his own kind.

He had no way of knowing that he was a throwback; his head was feral, his scent was different; it was his inherent wildness the blooded horse hated, and even feared.

The effect of such treatment on the young horse was about the same at it would have been on a boy of like courageous temperament. It sharpened his mind and reflexes while it soured his disposition. He eyed the world suspiciously, expecting always the worst. His every oil-smooth movement reflected an abnormal wariness.

By the time he was four years old he was definitely "queer." He spent hours moping, just staring vacantly off into space; then suddenly he would go careening off in a wide circle as if chased by fiends, or was chasing them. Occasionally he still made pathetic little gestures of friendship to other horses. But now rebuffs galvanized him into a battering, slashing fury.

When he was corralled with the other four-year-olds for breaking he only barely escaped being shipped to a slaughterhouse for glue and fox-food. Chunky, thick-necked, hairy-legged, he looked like a scrub stray from the wild bunch. After some hesitation, the boss wrangler decided to get rid of him as a "light farm chunk."

BREAKING him to harness, however, was as difficult as breaking half a dozen ordinary broncs, and twice as dangerous. He was spookier than six ghosts. He couldn't be worked as part of a team at all; his mere presence goaded a tame team-mate to unaccountable frenzy. In seconds the pair of them, heedless of the cursing breaker's wristling whip, were trying to kill each other in a tangle of broken harness.

But the boss wrangler was a stubborn man. "I'll bust that halfbreed jackass," he vowed, "or kill him!"

"Bust" him they did, though not his spirit; but when they had him "gentle" enough to let himself be harnessed by a cautious man, every wrangler on the ranch hated the sight of the blue-eyed buckskin, and three were living on borrowed time, so narrowly had they escaped his snake-quick, sledgehammer hoofs. He was finally sold to a one-horse farmer as "Blue."

The young farmer was a stolid, amiable gaint; he handled the horse cautiously, not ungently. And his two years of servitude as a lone farm-horse brought to the climax the only period of near-content the buckskin was ever to know. For on the farm he found the only companion and friend he ever had.

The farmer's five-year-old daughter fell in love with the ugly buckskin on sight. With the brief, clear vision of childhood, little Mary thought the brute's glassy blue eyes "purty;" his burrolike stripes made her laugh with glee. She called him "her Blooey," filched him sugar and carrots, shared apples with him. She combed his unkempt forelock, pulled his small pin-ears, hung fearlessly to his shaggy tail, as safe in her ignorance between his deadly hoofs as on her father's lap.

For the blue-eyed buckskin loved it. When he saw or heard the child coming, he would nicker shrilly and gallop to his pasture fence to meet her. He reveled in the flattery of another creature's affection. He didn't know quite what to make of her, the only child he had ever seen. But she filled the void of loneliness that had ever gnawed, maggotlike, in his brain, warping his mind until he had begun to be "queer." The lonely child and the outcast horse were pals.

But one day, tortured by a toothache, the farmer tried to ride the buckskin bareback into town.

At feel of the man clinging to his back, bronc instincts hardly dormant sent the buckskin explosively skyward. He bucked as his wild sires had bucked to dislodge lions clinging razor-clawed to their backs. He landed, riderless, about ten yards *behind* the spot where a split-second before he had been standing.

The farmer gaped up at him, dumfounded and awed.

With that one tremendous end-swapping buck, the farmhorse Blue sealed his own fate.

The boss wrangler remembered the buckskin with a wry grin as the farmer's wagon rattled into the ranchyard.

"Doc," the farmer said, "you sold me this cayuse as broke. Well, I ain't no wrangler. I can't ride him. I figgered mebbe you'd show me how."

"Light down," the horse rancher invited. "After supper I'll have one of the boys unkink him for you."

But horses have keen memories, especially for incidents that have hurt or frightened them. The instant he was turned loose in a corral, Blue knew where he was. Half-buried memories of stinging whips, hobbles and burning ropes, wielded by high-hatted men with jingling spurs on high-heeled boots, rose fresh in his mind.

He was as fretful as a treed wildcat when the farmer and a dozen men with those jingling things on their heels gathered after supper at the corral. Blue watched them out of eyes suddenly white-rimmed, gleaming. He flinched and retreated as the corral gate swung open. The farmer, carrying a halter, advanced toward him cautiously.

"Blue. Come on, old Bluey. *Here comes Mary.* Mary is here, Blue! *Mary!*"

The buckskin's ears pricked forward at sound of the beloved name. The wicked fighting gleam in his glassy eyes smoldered out. He nickered, glancing anxiously about. Nervously, he allowed the farmer to halter him and tie him short to the snubbing-post.

Then, treacherously, the one man he trusted deserted him as two wranglers, carrying saddles and ropes, entered the corral. Their ringing spurs maddened him, but Blue lunged for freedom in vain.

They had to tie up one of his hindfeet and blindfold him to fight a saddle onto his ominous-humped back. The stock redhead who was going to do the riding said thoughtfully: "I ain't forkin' that loggerhead near no snubbin'-post."

SO TWO more wranglers, on heavy-roping horses, rode into the corral. One put his rope around the buckskin's neck and choked him breathless while the other rider swiftly snubbed him to his saddlehorn. Together they dragged the blinded buckskin out of the corral and well away from it.

The redhead, a heavy quirt dangling from one wrist, eased himself into the saddle and "screwed down" tight.

"Okay."

Freed, the buckskin ducked his roman nose with an enraged bellow and exploded like a rocket. The redhead, loosened as abruptly as if he'd been bushwhacked, was clear of the

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saddle before the horse landed stiff-legged with his rump, twisted sidewise, still pointing at the sky.

Amid a chorus of guffaws, while the mounted wranglers caught and snubbed the pitching buckskin, the redhead roared from the ground: "Laugh, you knotheads! I'll bet five bucks there ain't one of you can ride him."

The big farmer grinned, said nothing. But he had an excited feeling in his chest when, an hour later, the buckskin had thrown, in less than three jumps, every one of the nine skilled riders who dared mount him. The remaining three wranglers decided that they had "et too much."

The buckskin, though he often nickered to her over the fence, never saw his child friend again, except at a distance; her father saw to that. And a week later two men in a buckboard drove into the farmer's yard; a fat man with foxy gray eyes, and a younger, rawboned man with noncommital, weather-squinted blue eyes, wearing a broad-brimmed Stetson, flannel shirt and high-heeled boots.

"Mr. Gibbons?" The fat man shifted reins to shake hands. "I'm the bronc contractor you wrote to. This here's Yakima Jones. He won the bronc-ridin' championship at Pendleton last year. He'll give your bronc a whirl to see how he measures up to rodeo outlaw standards."

Half an hour later Yakima Jones, bruised, disheveled and shaken, was telling the fat man earnestly: "Henry, this bronc is another Long Tom—mebbe two Long Toms and about six Angels. How in hell did I get out of that corral alive?"

"Yak, you flew," the fat man said sadly.

They drove out of the yard with the blue-eyed buckskin tied securely to the tail of the wagon. Behind them they left the young farmer and his thin wife excitedly re-counting more greenbacks than either of the couple had ever seen at one time before, and a heart-broken little girl wailing, "You come back here! You can't have my Blooey!"

From his first appearance in the arena, Umatilla Blue was a sensation, a "finals horse." Riders found him a baffling combination of the brainy master-bucker and of the locoed type of outlaw that usually kills himself in the arena. He bucked like a berserk fiend, but always with science and cunning. He tried to trample every rider he threw; he even tried to rough up the pickup men. His craft and viciousness increased with time. Wranglers, riders and pickups hated and dreaded him.

ONLY three men ever rode him; and only one dared scratch him. That champion buckaroo said of Umatilla Blue: "I'd rather ride Long Tom three times a day than that buckskin twice a week."

When "Jug" Spaden slumped unconscious from the buckskin at Miles City, doctors discovered that Umatilla Blue's bucking had torn the cowboy's liver loose.

Men could hardly believe that such a little chunk of horse could buck so hard. But no one was surprised when he finally broke down. All buckers do, if they don't first lose their spirit or kill themselves in action. But Umatilla Blue's career was especially brief. He simply bucked too hard. His spirit was wilder than even his iron legs could match. Even the agonizing pain that must have seared his body when he lay fallen for the last time in the arena could not break his spirit. He struggled to kill his rider with his teeth.

Men erected a bronze plaque over the grave of the bucker, Midnight; they still speak with affection of Long Tom and the mighty Steamboat. But only the bronc contractor who owned him felt anything but relief when Umatilla Blue's career was ended.

Maybe in some man's memory today there still lingers a time-dimmed picture of a chunkly little buckskin with weird blue eyes and a cross on his shoulders, standing off by himself in a corral near a sign reading, "DANGER—BRONC CORRALS." Maybe it was at Pendleton or Medicine Hat, Cheyenne's Frontier Days or the Sky-Hi Stampede—wherever great bucking-horses and great buckaroos clashed to entertain the howling mobs. There he slouched, always alone.

People passing, in gala mood, would stop to look, and find themselves staring into those creepy china-blue eyes that a cowboy-poet had in mind when he wrote of "the dead and depthless glassy glare of the killer-outlaw's eyes." Those eyes made people's flesh crawl, for behind them there seemed to be no soul, as if the spirit which once had sent an ugly little colt across a grassy pasture in eager search of friendship were burned out forever.

Sometimes spectators saw a strange phenomenon, which made them shudder when they thought of the possible consequences. A small child, clinging to her father's hand, would stop to stare at the outlaws; and suddenly the blue-eyed buckskin would come to life, and rush to the bars, nickering shrilly. Her frightened father would snatch up his baby and leap back, and one of the outlaws in the corral would aim a vicious kick at the buckskin, whose trembling excitement left him heedless of the blow.

He would continue to nicker, as though calling, until the child was completely out of his sight.

I wonder who remembers that essence of equine wickedness, Umatilla Blue? . . .

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THOSE

By WILLIAM R. COX

"I want out, Red," young Grant Deal demanded of Big Red Cantell after he'd spotted his brother at the train hold-up. . . . But when Big Red answered by saying, "George Oleson's in Silo, kid," Grant knew that "out," for him, could mean only that last, grim exit to an unmourned renegade's gravel

CHAPTER ONE

"H'ist 'Em!"

THE train puffed on the grade like a toiling dragon, throwing back a long dirty plume from its stack. In the coaches the lamps flickered over weary, bleary-eyed people heavy with sleeplessness. A quartet of drummers played poker on the flat top of a suitcase. Mack Deal sat quietly watching the girl and her mother.

She was a pretty girl and her mother had

RAIDING CANTELLS!

Gripping Novel of a Strange Man-Hunt

Grant was white, trying to get his weapon up.

been pretty once, too; but now she was tired and was being fussy and argumentative with Jenkins, the conductor. Their name was Terry, Jenkins had confided—Mrs. Terry, a widow, and her daughter Alice. The girl was calm amidst her mother's animadversions, a sweet-faced, tanned, shapely girl. Mack could not help looking at her. They owned a small ranch near Silo, Jenkins had added.

It would be nice to know a girl like that, Mack thought, and the lump rose again within him and he pulled his hat down over his slightly flattened nose and determinedly sought sleep which would not come. The train flat-wheeled up the grade, wheezing disconsolately, a part of Mack Deal's own mood.

He was nearing thirty, and his hands showed that he had worked and there were weather wrinkles at the corners of his gray eyes. He wore a dark coat and striped jeans and looked like a cowboy returning from Chicago to resume riding the range—he hoped.

Under his loose coat the holster with its .38 snub-nosed gun was uncomfortable, but

he chose to wear it there. He wanted to be inconspicuous, going into Silo. After he saw George Oleson at the bank and got some kind of job he could resume his cartridge belt and start looking for Grant. . . .

He twisted in the seat and the girl threw him a short glance. She had a sweet mouth, generous, large, and he found himself fighting the thought of how it would feel to kiss her, crushing her. . . .

He closed his eyes again, tight, thinking of Grant. The kid was twenty-one—about Miss Terry's age. He was handsome, and tall and husky—or had been when Mack had seen him last. That was two years ago come Christmas, before Mom and Pop had died.

Grant had been fine, then, working in the bank in Kansas, getting along, never being forced to dig like Mack. His success had been a great pride to his parents, and Mack had glowed with satisfaction, coming in after a cattle drive to Dodge to get together for the holiday. It had proved the last Christmas the family ever saw one another.

But Grant—he had simply disappeared. The week after the buckboard upset, tragically ending the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Deal, the week after the Kansas bank hold-up. . . . Grant was gone. No one knew where. Mack had spent all his money with the Pinkertons trying to locate him and that famous agency had failed. Now it was necessary to go to work himself in order to get more funds to continue his search.

He had to find the kid. He could imagine all sorts of terrible things and Grant was all the family he had. He had never realized how much family meant to him—Mack Deal, the wanderer—until it had been taken away from him.

Well, he would get this job over with, maybe collect a reward on top of his pay. Then he could go looking for the kid again. Grant was tough. He may have stood still while the robbers held up the bank—but so did all the others in the place at the time. When the Cantells struck it was a sensible thing not to make a play. The Cantells would kill a man like killing a fly unless he delivered when they held out their hands—one containing a .45 revolver, the other a flour sack. So the kid hadn't done anything and the Cantells had knocked over the bank, and then Grant had disappeared.

It did not seem sensible that Grant had felt the holdup so deeply that he had gone in search of the robbers. Nobody was catching Red and Bull Cantell, the brains and the brawn of Southwest banditry, the only robbers to rival the James brothers and the Youngers. Yet Grant, being young, may have done just that. It was a contingency Mack had to face, and he hated it, because he knew that if Grant ever caught up with that gang, it would be the end.

The train heaved over the top of the grade. For a moment the cars seemed to balance on the flat, as though undecided whether to go forward or just stay put.

It took the passengers several moments to realize that the train had made up its mind. It *was* staying in one place. The sound of the engine, chugging along, began to fade. Miss Terry came half to her feet, then glanced across the aisle at Mack Deal.

Mack came to his feet, his hand darting beneath his coat. At that precise instant a voice at the end of the car said, "Uh-uh, mister. Don't do that!"

HE WHEELED, staring, then dropped his hand, keeping it carefully in front of him. The man, a veritable giant, wore a red shirt and tight-fitting black pants and a wide, cream-colored Stetson. Across his nose was draped a red bandanna handkerchief. His gray eyes were enigmatic, but there was a steel in them.

He said: "Nobody's goin' to git hurt. Jest drop your valuables on the seats and stand up at the end of the car and nobody'll touch you."

Mack knew better than to reach for his pocketbook. He remained very quiet, shrugging and smiling at the girl. She drew in her breath and put her bag on the red plush.

Mrs. Terry recovered her breath. She said shrilly, "Bull Cantell, you're not going to take my money, for I won't give it to you! I know you, an' I knew your pappy, and you're not getting one single solitary penny out of me!"

The outlaw's eyes were mocking. He said, "Well, ma'am, you've got the advantage of me, but I seldom steal from women anyway. So you and the gal can consider yourselves let off."

One of the drummers slid his hand quickly behind his seat. Without changing expression, the bandit said flatly: "My pardner'll get that diamond ring, stranger. You can't fool us that easy."

The drummer paled. Up front there were shots. A tall man came in, dressed in black, and quickly went along picking up the money and jewels from the seats. It seemed a cursory bit of business, yet they were quick, thorough and calm about it, Mack thought. The tall man paused beside him, seeing him isolated, and reached inside his coat for the .38 gun. Breaking it, he emptied the shells into his own pocket, dropped the gun on the floor of the car and started on.

He took two steps, then halted, as though a thought had just struck him. His head swiveled and he raised his eyes, staring straight at Mack. Bull Cantell yelled from the door. "Trouble up ahead, kid! Hurry!"

The tall man retreated, but his step seemed reluctant, so that for a moment Mack thought this member of the Cantell's was going to shoot him down in cold blood. His blood did turn cold, momentarily.

Then Bull was leaping down and the tall youth was running behind the leader. Mack Deal went promptly into action.

He snatched up the gun and ran, thumbing cartridges into the chambers as he struggled with the door on the left side of the car. He managed to get it open and dropped to the ground. It was dark enough and he ran along the cars, trying to make as little noise as possible.

He heard a cold, incisive voice say, "Shove in the dynamite and touch it off."

Another voice said, "It'll kill 'em, Red."

"I gave 'em a chance," said Red Cantell. "Here, damn it, give me the stuff!"

The messenger and the mail clerk were in the locked car, Mack knew, and would not surrender. The big money was in there with them, too, and only dynamite would open the door.

He ducked under the car, his heart in his throat. He counted the feet of the outlaws around the car. If they set off the charge before he could act, they would add him to the list of dead. He counted four pairs of legs, including Bill's and those of the young, tall man who had stared at him.

He backed out from the precarious spot on the rods and started down the tracks toward the engine, or the place where the engine had been. He swung up on the top of the lead car and flattened himself on the roof. He held the .38 in his hand, aiming it at the shadowy figure who seemed to be the leader.

At that moment the car door opened. The messenger said sullenly, "I ain't bein' blowed up for no box of money. Help yourself, Red. I done what I could."

Cantell said harshly, "Drag it out, boys. And make it fast! We got a ride to make, and Mexico's gonna look awful good with this wad of dough."

Mack dropped his gun hand. If he fired now he would sacrifice the lives of the mail clerk and the messenger who had chosen to surrender their thrust. He waited while the boxes were pried open, then saw the bandits mount their horses with laden sacks and ride away, puncturing the night with pistol shots as a warning. He never got a shot at one of them.

It occurred to him that neither had he suffered any loss. The tall bandit had taken his gun, unloaded it—and left it. He had made no move to lift Mack's thin wallet. Bull

Cantell, as a matter of fact, had not seemed particularly interested in the loot from the coach.

Mack climbed down from the car and heard the guard say, "That's fifty thousand they got. Them devils sure know when to hit, and how to git away."

Mack Deal wondered about that. He walked back to his car, deep in thought. Red Cantell was the brains of the outfit. That crack about going to Mexico was too obviously a plant. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Next Stop—South America!

FOUR men topped a draw on fine, well-conditioned horses and a fifth came dashing up behind them. The fifth was breathless, but chuckling. He said, "Skeert that darky fireman plumb white. . . . The engineer was Bolster. 'Member him'?"

The leader said, "Yep. We hit him at Topeka. Let's ride now an' talk later."

The five went into the draw, then across a plain. The Caloochie Chain reared liked a giant camel, sheer rock with the hump of Bald Top blandly overlooking the desolation of verdantless mountain. The cavalcade rattled over shale which would leave no trace of their going and defiled into a narrow ravine.

Here a narrow passage lead into a grassy, well-watered deadfall. There was a cluster of small cabins, the remnants of mining machinery, a barn in fair state of repair. The riders saw carefully to the needs of their mounts, then gathered at the largest of the houses where a good lamp threw ample light across a checkered tablecloth of surprising cleanliness.

Everything about the camp was clean. There was the air of discipline among the men, too, as they sat on boxes or chairs, watching the intent man empty the sacks. Their faces were keen, hard, tanned, and they could have been cowboys.

Red Cantell had a high forehead, sharp brown eyes, thick auburn hair. He would have been handsome had his nose not been so thin and long, his chin so hatchet-like. His brother, the big Bull, was round-faced, fair, indolent of mien.

Gig Pruitt was youngish, with blue-dark skin where daily shaving could not quite prevail, gray-eyed, square-faced, serious. If there was cruelty in his catlike person it was controlled. He was a silent man, but never surly, and he had been with the Cantells from the start.

Jud Mason was old, wrinkled, and bow-legged. On his wrists and ankles he bore tell-tale scars, but they seemed to ride him lightly, although the guards of his prison days had been brutal and cruel. He was a veteran in sin, a sparrow-like ruffian, light-hearted, gun-handy, tougher than nails.

The fifth member was as tall as Bull, as lean as Red, younger than Gig and as saddle-tough as old Jud. On his handsome features, however, lay the difference between him and the others. He was not gay, he was not elated at the loot, he was not happy. He stayed apart from the others, his shoulder against the wall, his gaze turned inward, and quite evidently not liking what he saw there.

Red Cantell said quietly, "Ten thousand apiece. Share and share alike." It was a ritual, this last expression. He had never taken a leader's share. He counted the money around. His hands were precise, like a banker's hands. The fifth man winced as he picked up his share.

The others took their money carelessly, stuffing it into belts built commodiously for the purpose.

Jud Mason grinned, "I kin still see that colored fireman on his knees, prayin'."

Gig Pruitt laughed. "And there I was, beggin' Red not to the blow the messenger and clerk to hell and gone with dynamite. Red, mebbeso we better get some of the stuff."

"We'd of had it, only for keepin' so flat under cover," Bull said. "It paid, though, didn't it? They never expected us to hit 'em in this country. They think we're up Wyoming way."

Red said in his incisive voice, "I want them to think anything except that we're in the Caloochies. Now you all go and hit that jug and celebrate. Bull can play his git-tar and you can raise all the hell you want."

Gig said a trifle bitterly, "So long as nobody hears us."

"You know the plan," Red said sharply. "If we pull off one more good job we can put it over. You'll have plenty of women and wine and all a man can want in South America."

Gig said quickly, "I know, Red. You're right."

"The biggest ranchero on the Rio," said Bull happily. "No damn Pinkertons, no damnyankee bankers ner lawyers. Jest our own bunch and a crew of vaqueros to do the dirty work. C'mon, men, let's likker up. Ole Red'll stay up and watch fer us!" He patted his brother affectionately on the shoulder and led the others out. Only the youngest remained.

When they were alone, Red said quietly, "I know you're upset, kid. What is it?"

The youth shifted his position, putting his shoulders against the wall, his hands in his pockets. He said, "I want out, Red."

The leader planted elbows on the table. "You know better'n that, kid."

The youth said, "I can't help it, Red. My brother was on that train. He looked tired, and too old for his years."

Red said, "He's looking for you. But ain't it better that way than if he only had to ride to the pen to see you?"

"I don't know," said Grant Deal. "I'm beginning to wonder. Oh, I know what you did for me. Oleson had me in a jackpot, all right. He had me tied to the post with his figure-juggling. They'd have believed I stole the money if you hadn't come along and stolen the books along with the specie. I'd be in jail, but I'd be innocent all the same. Nothing can change that."

"You ain't guilty of anything so bad even now," said Red firmly. "Leastways, not the way I look at it. Yankees put reconstruction on us boys and we jest didn't surrender. We're gettin' back a little of what they plundered us of—and we don't kill no one we don't have to."

"My folks weren't Yankees nor Southerners," said Grant Deal. "We weren't in the fight. We had a little place and Mac worked to get me an education and maybe if it wasn't for the war we'd have done better. It's different with me, here. I want out—I want to see my brother and explain to him and start over again."

"Kid, your brother's been with the Pinkertons. You know I can't let you go until we start for South America."

"You've been planning that trip for two years—ever since I've known you," Grant said gloomily. "You never make it."

"PEOPLE need things," said Red. "We got families back in Kansas. . . . Kid, you got to stick. I wouldn't want to hurt you, but I'd have to. I got a brother out there. I know how you feel. But I'd have to kill you, Kid, if you made a break."

Grant Deal said slowly, "If that's the way it has to be, you'll give me a square shake, Red?"

The bandit shook his head and his lips thinned. "Not when it concerns my boys."

Grant said, "I'll have to take my chances, then. I'm withdrawin' my parole, Red."

"No," said Red decisively. "You're not. I wanted to save this, kid, but you're forcin' my hand. Kid, George Oleson's in Silo."

"Silo?" Grant Deal's young face grew hard as a mask. "Just over the mountain? That Silo?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Red. "He took his stolen dough and bought into a bank there a year ago. Man named Terry was his pardner, but Terry lost everything but a small ranch and then up and died. Mysterious-like. Oleson turned out to own everything."

"Naturally," said Grant Deal harshly. "And could prove it and make everyone believe him."

"Uh-huh," agreed Red. "I figgered you'd like us to make our last haul off him. Then we could sorta get in touch with your brother and tool him to Frisco. I know a crimp there will slip him something that won't hurt him a bit, after he wakes up, and then we'll be on our way to Rio with a couple hundred thousand among us. I'll personally guarantee your brother will be dealt in. Why, kid, it's like startin' a new country! We'll begin a Rebel colony of our own."

He got up abruptly and walked the length of the room. His hands became alive, gesticulating, the fire in his voice was commanding. "We'll show them greasers a thing or two. Give us time to pick wives, raise families. There'll come a day when we'll rule that country! There'll come a day when that bunch of crooks down in Washington will tremble at the sound of the name of Cantell! We'll send for everyone we can trust as soon as we get settled. Damn the United States of America! They beat us down, then kicked us when we was on our knees!"

It was the man's obsession and Grant knew better than to interrupt him. Red was as shrewd as any lawyer, as careful and clever

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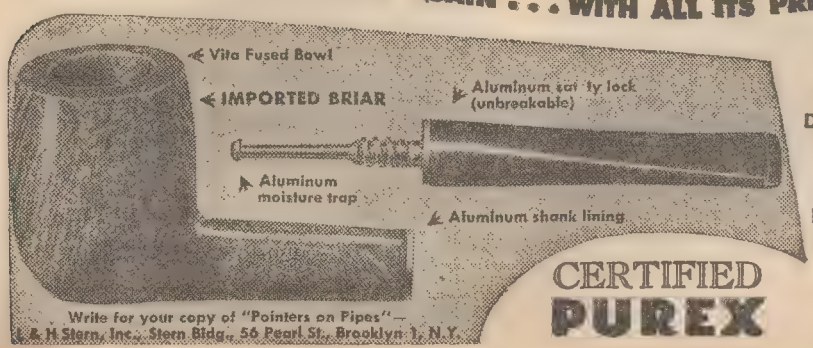
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The Cantell history was tragic, Grant knew. Riding with the Southern forces, Red and three older brothers had fought honorably with Jo Shelby in the Civil War. Bull had been younger, had remained at home. The other three brothers had been killed.

It ended at Spottsylvania Courthouse and the warrior had come home. He found his parents dying, his brother Bull trying to run the farm by himself. Red rolled up his sleeves and made ready to help. Then the carpet-baggers had come.

One sample of Yankee carpet-bag rule had been enough for Red and Bull. They buried their parents and killed themselves a couple of upstart lawyers and a judge. Then they rode off and began their career of banditry, not so spectacular nor bloody as the James boys nor the Youngers nor the Daltons, but more successful, perhaps.

Red was a smart organizer. He planned his campaigns as a general of an army might plan: He hit, made his haul and got away. He never hired outsiders, taking only old Jud from war days after Jud got out of jail for assaulting a Union officer, and the younger Gig who had grown up with Bull. There had been another, Ace Dexter, but Ace had fallen in the Kentucky raid, and they had needed a fifth and it was while Red was studying the bank in Kansas that he had learned by accident of Grant's plight and decided to kill two birds with one stone by taking the boy along and getting the layout of the bank.

Grant had had no choice. It was thrown in with Red or go to jail. Hot-blooded, young, he was romantic enough to think the free, wild life preferrable to facing George Oleson's machinations—and naturally he longed for another chance at Oleson.

He thought of all this, listening to Red. The leader of the gang turned and said, "You'd run out on this, kid?"

Grant took a deep breath. He said, "Not while Oleson's alive and prosperous. . . . But I'll hold you to that deal about my brother. And if he's hurt in any way, by God, Red, I'll gun you, win or lose!"

"Sure," said Red, coming close, gripping Grant's elbow. "Sure you will. You'd be a hell of a brother if you didn't. Now go down and have a snort or two. Listen to Bull sing!"

The big bass voice was booming, "If the ocean was whiskey, and I was a duck, I would dive to the bottom, to get one sweet sup. . . ."

"Sounds good, don't it?" Red said softly. "It's a good, free, wild life, kid. I ain't sorry for nothin'."

The wind was chilly in the mountains, and Grant shivered. He suddenly remembered the cashier in Wimongton who had tried to snap a derringer in Red's face and how Red had shot the man in the head, so that his brains ran on the floor and Red had muttered, "Didn't think he had brains, pullin' a pea-shooter like that on me!"

The man had been a damnyankee, all right, with a pinched face and fanatic, china-blue eyes. But he had been trying to save something that meant his job, his work in life. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

"Stay Away from Oleson!"

SILO was a town like many others, striving pushing, growing. Silo fed on mines on the edge of the Caloochie Chain and on cattle which roamed the plains to the south and west. Farms around the borders of the town were watered by Lake Caloochie and provided fresh produce and further revenue for the marts of trade and the new bank owned by George Oleson.

From the wide window in front of the bank Mack Deal could see Mrs. Terry flouncing into Hacker's Store, a basket on her arm, and he could see Alice Terry walking from her buggy toward the Irene Millinery Shop. Boyce's Hardware was across the street, Jeffrey's Hay, Grain and Feed close by. A smithy beat resoundingly on his anvil and George Oleson smiled.

Oleson was a tall, spare young man, brisk and energetic. He had light eyes, almost pale green, with arched brows and sparse, sandy hair and he spoke softly and in the most friendly fashion.

He said now: "I knew your brother well. A fine boy. Yes, indeed! I can't imagine where he could have disappeared to, Deal. We had that unfortunate robbery, and I thought it best to leave the old town and come to new country. . . . I've done well here, but of course I've had no word of your brother. None!"

"I was afraid of that," nodded Mack resignedly. "Now, about this other business. . . ."

Oleson's smile disappeared and his face became hard. "The Cantells—yes! I have word they are in this country."

"Hell, they robbed the train I was on," shrugged Mack.

"I mean they have a hideout here," said Oleson sharply. "My information is that somewhere within a hundred miles of Silo they are making headquarters."

Mack nodded. "Could be."

Oleson said abruptly. "Deal, I'll pay five thousand dollars to have that gang broken up. I saw them come in and rob the bank at home. I saw death in their eyes, and Deal, I have

no intention that they shall rob me here!"

Mack looked across the street, up and down the wide avenue. He said, "This wouldn't be a good spot for them to hit. The hardware store, the feed store, the smithy all are fine lay-ups for citizens with guns. And your wide open front lets everyone see smack into the bank all the time. The Cantells don't crack locked safes. They come in and hit you while the vault is open. This would be a tough one, and they don't pick tough ones."

Oleson said, "I tell you, Deal, if they are in this country they *will* hit this bank. It is the biggest and most prosperous I know Red. Cantells are somewheres around. And this being an illogical place to rob, he will plan for six months—then strike!"

Mack said, "I don't aim to be here in any six months. They said in Chicago you wanted a man for a job. . . ."

"I do!" said Oleson. He smiled again, disarmingly. "I'll pay you one hundred a month, Deal. You go out and comb the hills, the cow pastures, everywhere. You find evidence that the Cantells are in this country and I will raise a posse the like of which the Southwest never saw before. I'll send a hundred armed men against them! I will pay them deputy wages myself until they kill every one of that bunch!"

Mack said slowly, "You must be powerful scared of them."

"I fear them," nodded Oleson without losing his smile, "just as I would fear a mad dog if I were unarmed. And I want them exterminated as though they were mad dogs, which they are—mad dogs fattening on a peaceful citizenry."

Mack said, "Well, I can't very well refuse—your offer is too good. But I don't know this country, Oleson. And you've got a sheriff—a town marshal. . . ."

"Elected by the people," said Oleson bitingly. "Jowert, a fat fool. Meagher, an old relic. Politicians! No, Deal, I want my own man. Jowert will deputize you, and I will pay you. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Mack said, "I've been searchin' for my brother for two years, and haven't found hide nor hair of him. I reckon I've got experience in lookin', if not in findin'!"

"I'm satisfied with you," nodded Oleson. "I know your kind. You never let loose. The Cantells are somewhere around. And you will find them." He slapped a hundred dollars in new bills on the desk, his smile the widest it had been yet. He was a man knew how to make money and how to spend it, Mack saw, the new kind of man who was bringing prosperity to the Southwest in the wake of the bitterness of reconstruction.

He was not a man Mack would like for a close associate, however. He wore a smile for a mask . . . but he was a man it was best to respect. A careful man—a banker who hired protection in advance was George Oleson. Mack took the money, made his farewell and walked out onto Ballard Street.

He passed the general store and saw Mrs. Terry's head bobbing in argument with sour-faced Hacker. He slowed down outside Irene Mansfield's store and the two young women there pretended a great interest in a bolt of silk they were examining in the light of the afternoon sun. He said, "Howdy, girls." Then: "Miss Terry, I see you like town shopping on Saturday."

Alice Terry said, "How are you, sir?"

Irene Manning had round, brown eyes and a warm, friendly smile. The eyes twinkled as she asked: "Could I sell you a silk shirt, made by my own hands, Mr. Deal?"

He looked at the roman-striped material and said reluctantly, "If I was a cowboy, right now, and honin' for the dance in town, I could go for one like that."

"There's a dance tonight," said Miss Manning boldly.

"I'll claim a dance," nodded Mack. He and Alice made much of not addressing a word directly to each other. Irene giggled and Mack walked on, replacing his hat. He came to the Silo Bar and pushed the swinging doors.

IT WAS cool and pleasant in the bar. Sandy, the bartender, uncorked a cool beer and slid in front of Mack. Jackson, the blacksmith, came in, sweating, and had another. Hacker came down from the store and there were several cowmen along the bar, talking.

Hacker was a big, muscular, noisy fellow, always scowling. He said, "I'm gonna sell out. I like money, but I don't like the way I been makin' it."

They were all beginning to make a little money. Times were getting better, Mack thought, but he was doing nothing to secure his own future.

A tall, bland-faced man in miner's clothing entered the bar room. He moved in next to Mack, and ordered beer. No one seemed to know him, but he looked vaguely familiar to Mack.

The man smiled and said in a low, pleasant voice, "Nice day. Have one, stranger?"

Mack said, "Don't mind if I do."

They drank. The big man said, "Lively li'l town. I just come down from the Hitch Mine—haven't been in this country long."

Mack said, "Me neither. Silo's a busy place."

"Plenty money comin' in now," the big man nodded wisely.

Fat Sheriff Jowert entered. He said to Mack, "Been lookin' fer you. Oleson sent me."

Mack finished his beer, nodded to the big man. "Sorry. I'll be back and buy you one before the nights over."

"Okay," smiled his new friend. "I'm Jack Clabber."

Mack told his name and went down the street with the Sheriff. The official jail was at the end of the street. In plain view of anyone passing by, the Sheriff dragged out a dog-eared Bible and mumbled over Mack's hand. He said, "I don't s'pose yuh want a star, huh?"

Mack said, "Why not?"

"Better not have one if you go arter the Cantell's," said Jowert carelessly. "They shoot deputies on sight."

Mack said, "Who told you I had anything to do with the Cantells?"

Jowert shrugged his misshapen shoulders. "Everyone knows George Oleson's skeert they'll hit 'im. He gits you deppitized—even a dang fool kin figger out your his body-guard."

"So you figured it out," snapped Mack. "Well, keep it to yourself."

"You don't need t' worry," said Jowert disinterestedly. "You'll never find 'em."

Mack got himself out of the dirty little office as quickly as possible. He almost ran into old Marshal Meagher. The tall, lanky town officer's eyes were bright, his manner courteous as he apologized for being in the way. He wore two ornate pearl-handled revolvers and a goatee and mustache, but his hair was too long. He looked seedy. He went on, walking at an old man's gait.

Mack went on to the hotel to change and bathe. Politics in this town had certainly elected a couple of queer ones to defend the law. He wondered who controlled the local situation at the polls. He paused and asked the room clerk in the hotel, "Who's the big noise in politics here?"

"Who's bleedin' the town for all its new money?" asked the clerk, a hard-bitten old gaffer.

Mack said, "Ha! I see!" He mounted the stairs. It was strange that George Oleson should have been so bitter about the town law.

He got out clean clothing and bathed as best he could in the basin on the wash stand. He began to think about the dance tonight and as he thought he whistled. Alice Terry was certainly attractive. She wasn't very approachable, but that was the way a lady should be. Tonight, though, through the good offices of Irene Manfield, he would be able to balk the old lady and get some time alone with Alice, he hoped.

He went out the door, still whistling, dressed in gray broadcloth, a fine city suit he had bought in Chicago, with a flowing black bow tie decorating his white shirt front. He closed the door and was about to lock it when he saw the note attached to it by a sharp nail.

He took the note and went back in the room. It was printed, with heavy crayon, upon a piece of paper torn from a package. It read, "Don't be a damn fool. Stay away from Oleson and leave the Cantells be. They ain't done you nuthin'."

He folded the paper carefully and put it in his pocket. He reluctantly reached down his holster and gun and fitted them under his coat, utterly ruining the set of it. He went out and down through the lobby of the hotel and across to the Silo Bar. He looked among the throng which had come in for the Saturday dance, but he did not see his big, jolly friend of the previous hour.

He went thoughtfully to dinner, not angry at himself for failing to recognize the man at once, but assured now that Oleson was right about one thing. The Cantells were in the neighborhood of Silo, all right. Oleson knew what he was talking about.

The big man had been wearing a mask when Mack last saw him, and he had been disguising his voice. But there wasn't much doubt in his mind that the man was Bull Cantell.

And a very nice fellow he seemed, Mack thought perplexedly. Incidentally, Mack still owed him a return treat!

CHAPTER FOUR

Mission for a Gunman

THE lights of Silo were plain in the near distance. The three men sat under a spreading cottonwood, their horses grazing nearby. Red Cantell said, "Bull's about due. . . ."

"First time we ever tried this night work," remarked Gig Pruitt. "Seems funny."

Jud Mason said, "It'll seem funnier when the cyclone hits!"

Red said, "Quiet!" and drew his gun, fading a little into the trees from long habit. But in a moment he reholstered his weapon, and shrugged. It was Bull, on a hammer-headed horse he had bought to fit his miner's clothing.

The big man dropped to earth lightly as a cat and said cheerily, "Hiya, Red? Hiya, fellas? All ready for the big party?"

Red said, "We're ready if you are. You did all right, eh?"

Bull said, "Oleson's got a bank stached where a half dozen locals could handle us by daylight. He's got the bulk of the money he keeps on hand in a big vault with an iron door. Had the vault made o' stone—damnedest thing ye ever seen. . . .Say, where's the kid?"

Red said, "You were late, so I sent him prospectin' for you."

Bull protested, "Not into Silo!"

"I told him to keep out of Oleson's sight," said Red. "I wanted him to take a look at the bank. He knows banks, and can figger out the habits of this 'un from what he knew about Oleson. It was dark when he went in, and anyway Oleson wouldn't be lookin' fer the kid in range clothes, grown like he has. . . ."

"Oleson, hell!" snorted Bull. "Red, you're the keerful one. You never make mistakes. But this time you sure have plumb slipped. Red, Mack Deal is in Silo! Furthermore, he's been hired by Oleson to track us down."

Red said, "He got off at Silo? Then when you seen him on the train he was trackin' us! We should'a' shot him then, dammit!"

Bull said, "I seen the sheriff swear him in."

"If the kid sees his brother. . . ."

"He'll turn us in," interjected Gig Pruitt.

"Yeah, that's right," said Bull.

"We better call this deal off," said Pruitt. "We better make tracks with what we got, forget the kid and move west."

"That maybe ain't a bad idea," agreed Bull. "We never took enough time to plan this thing anyhow."

There was a silence. They all talked freely whenever they had anything on their minds, but it was Red who had the last word.

He took a deep breath, stood up. They all followed example, like trained automatons. His voice was low and hard. "Oleson's got the biggest cash on hand of anyone between here and Frisco. He's eucherin' somebody every day and it takes cash to swing things. We got a sack of dynamite, we know there's a dance in the schoolhouse tonight. I don't believe the kid'll turn us in—and I'm for goin' in and gettin' that rat Oleson's poke."

Jud Mason cackled, "Me too! I wanta crack that stone vault with the boom sticks!"

The other pair sighed. They turned to their horses, loosened their rifles. Bull said, "Okay, Red. . . . But we better hit quick, so the kid won't have a chance to squawk. The dance is about startin'. . . ."

GRANT DEAL wore black, which matched his mood. Since his attempt to break away from Cantells and Red's counter-proposal of a raid on Oleson's bank, he had built up his hatred of the former cashier until he was completely obsessed with thoughts of revenge.

Men and women went down Ballard Street to the schoolhouse, laughing, dressed in their Sunday best, and in the Silo Bar voices were raised in harmonious conversation. Grant padded by in the darkness, surveying the bank.

He knew Bull had been in town and was satisfied that Bull would take back a report. But Red had wanted to make sure, as he always did, that no slight angle was overlooked. Grant paused in front of Boyce's Hardware Emporium and leaned against the building.

The bank was well situated to repel a sudden raid, all right. There was a light burning which showed its empty inside so that all could see, and the flat, forbidding face of the huge safe and stone vault built into the rear of the chamber was visible from where Grant stood. There was only one way to crack that vault—and Red had figured it out instantly.

There was nothing Grant could add to the Cantells' knowledge. He shrugged, drifting in the shadows, following the crowd westward on Ballard Street toward the schoolhouse. The dance was beginning. In a little while the Cantells would ride in and he would join them when the explosions began. Meantime, he could watch normal, everyday people and wish he were one of them. He saw a slim, fair girl and a rounded, short, brown-eyed girl going into the schoolhouse escorted by a forbidding, faded older woman.

The dark girl said, "Now, Alice, don't hurl yourself at him. He'll come around."

"Hush, Irene!" snapped the fair girl. "Someone'll hear you."

"He's mighty attractive," Irene said, undaunted. "But I like them younger and less world-weary."

They passed out of Grant's hearing. Irene sounded merry. He would like to know Irene.

For two years he had known no one but the Cantells, and Gig and Jud. He had remained hidden except when a raid was on. He had refrained from spending money because they needed everything they could save for the "cause." He had rigorously followed the rules of the gang and they had come to trust him. . . .

He lighted a cigarette with trembling fingers. It had occurred to him suddenly that all this time, consorting with criminals, had made

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him into one of them. He supposed there were hundreds of people who could identify him as one of the Cantell band, if it came to a big trial and the newspapers got after him. He had really never thought of that before.

He was, truly, an outlaw. He had never felt like one before, but the freedom and gaiety of these people in Silo had brought it home to him as he had lurked here, spying. He threw away the cigarette, and wheeling abruptly, walked down to the Silo Bar.

A man came onto the street and Grant asked him: "Where does George Oleson live?"

"The big house yonder," said the man without glancing at Grant. "He'll be to home. He don't hold with dancin' much."

The house was on one of the side streets, a wide one with a board walk. It had a lawn and looked solid, well-built. Grant took a post under a tree and began his vigil. There was a light in the house and once he saw the tall, muscular figure of Oleson pass from one room to the other, a ledger of some sort in his hand. He was still messing with accounts, Grant thought; it would be very easy to slip across the street and shoot through a window. . . .

He shook himself out of it. That was no good, he knew. The way to hurt Oleson was through his pocketbook. Red Cantell would take care of that tonight.

He wondered where Mack had been going on that train. It worried him that Red might not be able to get in touch with Mack when they got ready to take off from Frisco. He wanted to see Mack very badly. He was still young enough to need an older brother now—and he wished he could know a girl like that Irene. . . .

THE cowboys were giving Alice Terry a terrific rush and Mack had a time getting his dance. But at eleven he won through. They had circled the floor once when he caught her hand and whispered, "It's dark outside, but I'd like to talk to you—even without a moon."

It was then he discovered the slight sign of worriment on her brow. Her mother, he saw, was talking to the dour Hacker, who was frowningly shaking his head. They eased through a side door and leaned against the schoolyard fence, hidden by shadows. He said, "Miss Alice, I'm not tryin' to make love to you. That ain't my style on such short acquaintance. It's just that a man gits hungry to talk to a woman. . . ."

She said, "I know. Sometimes a girl gets frightened and needs to talk, also. There is no one here—no one—"

"You're in trouble," he said gravely.

"A person can talk to a comparative stranger," she mused, "better than to a close friend, sometimes."

"If I could do anything. . . ."

She said, "Nobody can do anything. George Oleson has got us."

"Oleson?" he said with surprise.

"He was my father's partner. He bought in when father needed money. Then father got killed. . . ."

"I thought your father just—died," said Mack.

"He was the most alive man in the county," she said, suddenly passionate, aroused from the apathy he had noted. "He came to town to have a showdown over some mortgages Oleson had foreclosed against friends of his. He came home ill and died before morning. The doctor hemmed and hawed and said it was heart trouble. But father was poisoned—I know it!"

Mack said, "Now wait. . . ."

"He was at George Oleson's house, drinking coffee. Oleson doesn't drink whiskey. He goes to church and won't even dance. He's an angel," the girl said scornfully. "He holds a mortgage on everything we own and he wants to marry me."

Mack said dully, "And I work for that man."

The silence was so thick he could have cut it with his Barlow. Then the girl said quietly, "Everyone in Silo works for him, one way or another. You didn't know."

Mack said, "I'm supposed to track down some outlaws for him."

"No outlaw is as bad as George Oleson," the girl said. "He steals from the poor. The Cantells only take from the rich."

Mack shook his head, murmuring, "The Cantells take from everyone and anyone. But they risk their lives doing it. A banker gouging the homesteader, his partner—he works within the law."

"One is as bad as the other," the girl proceeded. "Well, Mack Deal, that is my story. And in a week mother and I will be homeless."

He took her hand and held it. He told her then, in a rush of words, about his life, his search for Grant, his lack of funds because of that search. He told her all about everything, and when he had finished he said earnestly, "I can work and I can make money. I can stay right here in Silo and fight Oleson. Let me go to him. I'll see him tonight, make an arrangement to swap my services for the interest on your ranch. . . ."

"You've forgotten his interest in me for a wife," she said gently. "He is quite serious about that."

"Yes," said Mack dully, "I'd forgotten that."

"I am grateful to you," she said, squeezing

his hand. "It has done me a lot of good to get all this out of my system. But now I must go inside and let mother think I am being brave. But I'm not feeling so brave, Mack."

"Yes," he said. "You go inside."

"You'll dance with me again?"

"Yes," he said. He saw her to the door and into the arms of a happy, sweating cowboy. Only then did he say to himself: "Yes, I'll dance with you again, but not tonight, darling!"

He went back to the hotel and up to his room. He unwrapped a dull-metal Colt's .45 and with a soft rag wiped it carefully free of grease. He slid shells into the chambers; then adjusted the belt around his waist, feeling its snug, familiar fit with a grim satisfaction.

He went out softly passing down the stairs and out onto Ballard Street. He walked past the schoolhouse and listened to the music of the fiddle and caught a glimpse of Alice dancing. He set his jaw and started for the side street upon which George Oleson's house loomed, throwing a long shadow as the moon finally crept from behind a bank of heavy clouds.

He passed the bank and glanced in at the lighted scene, the cage, the front of the huge vault with its thick iron door. All was serene. The smug, neat symmetry of the bank was a symbol of George Oleson's quickly-won, absolute domination in Silo. It was inviolate, impregnable, its owner all-powerful. Mack's spirits registered zero. His pace slackened as he studied out what he was going to say, upon the word of a pretty girl and a couple of meager citizens whose names he did not know, to the czar of Silo. He could, he thought helplessly, at least sound off his opinion and then resign. The gun on his hip seemed a futile weapon now. George Oleson would merely smile, probably accept his resignation, and then ask for the return of the hundred dollars.

Mack slowed down, sauntering, his mind working hard, trying to think up a scheme to force Oleson into an action which would compromise him in some way. In time, he thought grimly, he could manage it. If his search for Grant were off his mind, he was sure he could match wits with this small town boss. Oleson would be vulnerable in some way.

Across the street a tall young chap knew it was time to move. He started for Ballard Street and the bank.

Inside the house George Oleson closed his ledger and put his hand to his head. Down at the banks were some papers regarding the Terry mortgages. They were complicated, but he had early bought up the lawyer in town. He expected no real trouble on that score. Still, he thought, he could go down and make a last check. He liked the bank, its solidity, its fortress-like strength. It made him feel secure. He reached for his hat, smiling to himself, and went to the door, taking one last proud look at his possessions, his fine new furniture and clean, well-ordered house. It paid to have an orderly, single-track mind in the hurly burly, hail-fellow-well-met Southwest. It paid—in good, hard cash.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun-Fire Getaway

THE rear entrance to the bank had not been too difficult. Jud's experience with files and metal saws had stood them in good stead. The only chance they took was with the screen. This had been Red's big idea, and it was a jewel—something he had picked up in the big cities in his frequent visits. The dangerous moment was when they brought it in. . . .

But they picked the time when the dance was going full tilt, and then Bull and Gig bore it between them. Jud had the door broken open; Red held the door and his two guns.

Bull and Gig slid it into place. It was a work of art. The three of them stood behind it and laughed.

Jud said, "Got alla time we need, now. Lay outside and me and Red'll do the work."

Bull and Gig went out through the smashed door. They walked around front and stood unobtrusively across the street, admiring their handiwork. Bull had a gift for things like that.

The safe was apparently as solid as ever. The door with the letters "Silo National Bank" was without a scratch. It had been easy to get the canvas, make the frame. Then Bull's skill with a brush and paints had done the rest.

The result was a screen behind which Jud drilled into vulnerable spots of the big safe's door. The screen was painted to resemble the door of the safe and placed three feet away from the real door. Red Cantell worked with the dynamite sticks. Bull grinned and nodded at Gig.

They separated, and each picked up a rifle he had left in a dark corner. They commanded the street from positions of comparative safety in the shadows of the smithy and the hardware store.

Inside the bank, Jud said, "Make sure you set them fuses right. There's gonna be a hell of a explosion and we gotta work quick. The hull town'll be on us."

Red said, "Drill, damn it!"

Jud sweated, blowing spirals of metal from a hinge joint. "That'll be it, Red. Stick 'em in thar and then git out back."

Red said, "You sure you know how short

you want the fuses? We got to be sure—"

"I'm sartain they got to be short an' sweet," grinned Jud.

Red said, "There'll be close to another fifty thousand in there. If we blow it to pieces, we get nothin' for our pains."

Jud said, "Go out an' look fer the kid to show. He ain't turned us in—I told you he wouldn't."

Red said, "Can't imagine what he's doin' though. Unless he's takin' care of Oleson personal."

Jud said, "Okay, Red. . . . Git!"

Red slid out the ruined rear door. The horses were hobbled a safe distance away. The street was covered. He thought of every angle, knew he had it right if the safe blew as it should. He wondered about Grant Deal; if the kid showed up, so much the better. He liked the kid, all right. But nothing could interfere with his dream of independence—nothing. . . .

THE tall figure of George Oleson loomed, coming from the house. Mack Deal stopped, letting the moonlight fall upon him. Oleson peered at him, said, "Ah, good-evening, Deal. Not dancing?"

Mack said, "I wanted to talk to you, Oleson."

"Fine!" said the banker, his teeth shining in the familiar smile. "I was just going to the bank. Come along."

"I don't think I want to be seen in your bank with you," Mack said deliberately. "I've been hearin' things about you. Things I don't like."

Oleson said smoothly, "The penalty of success, Deal. Everyone hates the rich banker. Malcontents who cannot hope to ever become more than paupers will always curse him."

Across the street the tall young man in the shadows tensed suddenly. He strained to hear the voice of the square-built man who was talking with Oleson.

Mack said, "Silo is an average town. I wouldn't call my informers low-grade. Now, take the Terrys, for instance. . . ." He paused, narrowly regarding the moonlit face of the banker.

Oleson's smile grew a trifle thin. He said, "Why, I hope to make Miss Terry my wife, Deal. Be a bit careful. . . ."

"She don't figure on it," Mack said bluntly.

"You've been here only a short time," Oleson said smoothly. "You don't realize the situation."

"Oh yes I do," Mack said. "You've got the Terrys in a jackpot, and you figure to run over them. You think the girl will have to marry you. It's thinkin' like that often ruins a man of your make-up."

Oleson said, "I hired you for a job, Deal, and I paid you well—in advance. There was no mention of moral lectures. . . ."

Mack interrupted, "I'm quittin'."

"I'll take my money back, then," Oleson said. The smile had gone and his face was hard. "And I'll hear no more damned nonsense from you. In the past I had to listen to your weak-kneed brother beg for his life. . ."

Mack said sharply, "What was that?"

"Your brother," said Oleson coldly, "was an embezzler. I covered him up. He escaped because of my leniency. It will be better for you—and for him, wherever he is—if you turn over to me my hundred dollars and leave town quietly. My word is law here, Deal. . . ."

The figure across the street moved as if galvanized. The young man came noiselessly toward the two in the dust of the street, his face contorted with rage. His hand went to his holster, snapped his gun loose. He fought to control the rage which shook him to his boots.

Mack said, "You dirty son, if you dare say my brother is crooked—"

Grant's voice cut harshly across the words: "He tried his best to make out I was one. He stole the money and fixed it to look like I did it. Stand aside, Mack, and let me blow out his filthy guts!"

Oleson leaped six feet away. He stood, trembling, making no move toward the gun beneath his coat. Mack cried, "Grant! You ornery kid!"

Mack's hand went out, seized Grant's wrist in a firm grasp. He said quickly, "Don't shoot him down. There are other ways."

"He's ruined more lives than he'll ever pay for!" Grant exclaimed hotly. "Let me finish him. He's a snake. Let him take a—"

Mack said, "No, Grant. It'd be murder. Look at him! He's scared to death. You can't kill him like this."

Grant's gun snapped back into the holster. "Let him draw, then. I'll give him first shot."

"There are two of you," Oleson whined. "I haven't got a chance against the two of you."

"It's no use, kid," Mack said. "Come on. Leave him be for now. I'll find a way to fix him and it will be regular. Come on, kid."

He began backing away, tugging at Grant. He was overjoyed now, his search at an end. With the kid to side him and Alice Terry and her fortunes at stake, he could rouse the slumbering opposition of this town and make a whale of a fight against Oleson.

Grant said, "I can't do it, Mack. I've got to get him, right now. There are things you don't know. These past two years. . . ."

The first dull explosion went booming on the night air. The three men froze, tensed.

The second sounded. Grant muttered, "That does it!"

Oleson cried, "The bank! It's my bank! It's those Cantells!"

Shots sounded on Ballard Street, flat, whining rifle shots. It was Grant's turn to seize hold of his brother. "Don't go," he whispered. "They've got the town covered. You don't know them."

Mack said, "They've blown up the safe! How did they do it so quick? I was just past there!"

Oleson cried in an agonized voice: "They're dynamiting the vault!" He ran crazily past the brothers, toward the intersection. A calm voice called, "Git down, pardner. Git down and pray!"

A rifle bullet screamed and Oleson flung himself to earth, groveling, moaning, "They'll get my cash—all of it!"

Mack pulled himself away from Grant. He said, "This way!" He ran between the houses, and circled back to Ballard Street between the Silo Bar and the millinery shop of Irene Manfield. Grant, at his side, said, "Mack, they know every angle. You can't buck them and not get killed."

Mack had his revolver in his hand. People were streaming from the schoolhouse. He saw Sheriff Jowert, a shotgun clutched across his sagging belly, darting toward Jeffrey's Hay and Grain store. The rifle fire was directed high, but the bandits kept it going.

Grant said, "They won't shoot anyone if they don't have to. But they're death when anyone comes too close."

Mack began edging along the front of the millinery shop. He caught a glimpse of a big man reloading the chamber of his rifle with a grin on his broad face. He saw a dark man who took up the firing while Bull Cantell reloaded.

Sheriff Jowert came out of the shadows. He was an ignorant political tool, but this was his county seat, and he was sworn to uphold the law. He lifted the shotgun as Gig Pruitt slapped the last cartridge in his magazine. He drew a bead on Bull Cantell.

Gig said, "Well, they're beginnin' to ask for it!"

THE dark bandit fired from the hip, almost negligently, the muzzle of his rifle aimed at the sheriff. Jowert's hand flew out, as though he was trying to grab something to hold himself erect. Failing, he stumbled forward, the shotgun falling at his feet and exploding harmlessly as the triggers jarred down. Jowert sagged and lay still.

Mack stepped out of the doorway and raised his gun. He snapped one quick shot, then dropped back. Gig Pruitt cried, "Dammit! Why don't they hurry? He got me, Bull. In the shoulder." He shifted the rifle to his left hand and tried to turn it towards the spot where Mack was crouched. Grant swore feverishly, lifting his revolver. The trigger seemed to press itself.

Gig Pruitt dropped the rifle. He said, "They're shootin' awful straight, Bull. . . . If the kid would only come up."

Grant heard him distinctly. He bit at his lip. He lowered the revolver, staring at the smoking muzzle. He had never liked Gig as well as the others, but he had ridden with him, broken bread with him on many a trail.

Marshal Meagher appeared as though by magic. He came from an alley across the street and directly opposite the body of the sheriff. He stepped out, a plain target, lean, old, bent, the two pearl-handled guns already speaking. Gig Pruitt spun, fell. "Bull! They—they got me!"

He didn't move. Bull's rifle began cracking. The Marshal seemed to double up like an old accordion. His guns still blazing, he fell face forward into the street and lay there.

Mack knelt, to make a smaller target. He snapped one more shot. He saw the big man with the rifle stagger, then break into a run. He fired again, but Bull was between the bank and the next building and out of sight.

Mack called, "Around the back! They've got their horses in the back!"

He circled again. He saw George Oleson running for Ballard Street and heard a sound of hoofs. He ran as hard as he could, Grant behind him. He could head them off, he knew, and get at least one of them as they rode out the back way. By the time they got the big one into the saddle and were organized to make a rear guard fight he could come upon them and pick off the leader, perhaps. If he could get Red Cantell, the band would never be the same again. Without Red they would be easy prey for a posse.

He sped over a cleared city lot. He heard the horses again as he reached the rear of the bank. Grant panted in his ear, "Be careful, Mack! They're all dead shots!"

Mack pulled up, amazed. He said, "They're gone!"

Grant listened for an instant. Then he said, "Back to the street, to pick up Gig. That's what they'd do!"

They ran, but now it was too late. Four horses were disappearing eastward. One bore a figure which lay across the saddle, held in place by the men who rode on either side of him. But organized pursuit was impossible with the two lawmen of the town lying dead in the street.

From within the bank George Oleson was ranting: "They got away with every cent. . . . Look, they set up a screen, painted like the front of the safe and blew up my vault! They got every dime in cash I owned! I'm a ruined man! This whole town is ruined!"

Mack said grimly, "Picture of a strong, cold-blooded banker facing a loss. The rotten scum!"

Grant was silent. They walked back down the street and joined the crowd around the Marshal and the Sheriff. Mack said, "Get some horses together. We'll have to go on without the law."

Boyce said, "Chase the Cantells? Waste o' time."

"Ye might ketch 'em," said another man grimly. "Then what?"

Mack said, "One of them is done for. Are you all afraid of three men?"

"Two Cantells and Jud Mason," said Boyce. "Yep. I'm skeert."

A cowboy said, "T'aint no use, anyway, Mister. They'll be gone afore we kin git started. They're like ha'nts."

Mack turned disgustedly away. Grant followed him toward the hotel. Alice and Irene darted from the door of the millinery shop and stopped them. Alice said, "We all despised Jowert and Meagher. But they evidently were the only men in town besides you, Mack."

Mack said, "This is my brother Grant I told you about. . . . We're going after them. Three against two isn't such bad odds."

Grant was looking down at the pale face of Irene Manfield. Slowly color returned to her and a dimple showed. She said softly, "I didn't even know Mack had a brother—much less such a handsome one!"

Grant said, "Why—thank you, Miss Manfield. Er—my brother sure knows some good-lookin' girls!"

Alice said, "They robbed Oleson's bank. . . . If only they hadn't shot down those two poor, pitiful men, I'd be grateful to them."

"Most people feel that way," Mack agreed. "But it won't do. They've murdered and they've robbed and now someone's got to go after them. I carry a shield from the Pinkertons—good all over the country. I guess Grant and I'll have to play this out lone-handed."

"Yes," said Alice. "And you're working for Oleson. . . ."

"I quit," said Mack flatly. "We'll attend to him later. But first we got to make an effort. Grant—you got a horse?"

"Sure," said Grant. "But—"

Mack was already striding toward the stable. He would borrow one of the hotel horses, then borrow a rifle and some ammunition and take up the trail. He was a good tracker from away back and with this tall brother to side him, he could really do a job. And it wouldn't end with bandits, he thought exultantly. There was still George Oleson. After he had heard Grant's full story he would know better what to do about the crooked, greedy banker. Meanwhile Jowert and Meagher were dead—and people had to have somebody to look out for their interests. He began to shape the future in his mind as he dragged Grant away from Irene Manfield and urged him to bring up his horse.

CHAPTER SIX

Fast Lead

THEY rode across the shale and onto the grass of the first ravine. Grant Deal took the horses and hobbled them among the trees and returned. He looked older in the morning light, and there were lines of exhaustion and spent emotion in his young face.

Mack said quietly, "This is it."

"Yeah," Grant said. "And I feel kind've at peace at last."

Mack said, "You've got to think of it the right way, Grant. You rode with them. You couldn't turn them in—not to a posse. But this is just you and me. They took money belonging to Silo people—not only to George Oleson. If he's ruined, the town will suffer. I want to start a life in that town. We can both make out there—after we settle with Oleson."

Grant said, "I never killed anyone, Mack. And I've got the loot of those two years in my belt."

Mack said, "That's the way to think about it. We're not sneaking in and acting like traitors."

Grant said, "Let's go, huh, Mack? I want to get it over."

"Okay, kid," said Mack. "You go ahead."

They walked, Grant in the lead, into the second, narrow defile. As they neared the spot where the pass widened at its mouth, Mack dropped behind a bush. A voice called, "Stop, kid!"

Grant said, "That you, Bull?"

The big man's left arm was bandaged, but he held a rifle in his right hand, athwart his hip. He said coldly, "Where you been, kid? You didn't show when we needed yuh."

Grant said, "I was busy. You got a gun on me. Can I come in?"

"You better come in," Bull said harshly. "Red will wanta see yuh."

Grant walked stolidly past the big man and into the old mine location. Mack came out of the brush and followed unseen. It was a simple maneuver. Bull knew no posse could have come that close without making a noise and assumed the kid was alone. The Cantells felt perfectly safe in their hiding place, and they knew Grant would not willingly make himself a hostage if a gang of men were behind him. Mack paused behind a boulder, watching.

There was a freshly dug grave over under

a willow tree. Smoke eddied from the biggest house. Jud Mason arose, folding a clasp knife, dropping a hunk of pine he had been whittling. Red Cantell came out and stood motionless, staring coldly at the kid.

Grant said, "Hello, Red. I got something to tell you."

Red said, "I've got something to tell you, first. You failed us back there. Gig got killed. Bull is hurt and we can't make our run until he gets better. I blame it to you."

Grant stood very tall and slim. He said quietly, "That's all right, Red. I know you mean to kill me. You once told me you wouldn't give me a break when the time came. . . . I could have led a posse out here, Red. But I didn't."

Red said, "We were ready for a posse. I didn't use all the dynamite on that bank."

Grant said, "No, I wouldn't rat on you like that. But I wanted to come out and tell you I was through."

"Through!" Red snorted. "You're damn right you're through!"

Grant said, "Well, that makes it even, then? I don't owe you anything?"

Red said sharply, "What kinda talk is that? No, you don't owe me anything—outside of your worthless life!"

Mack sauntered out from behind the rock. He wore his Colt in its holster, his hands swung free. He said, "I'm Mack Deal. Grant's my brother. You'll have to kill the two of us, Red."

For a moment, so perfect was the surprise, that no one moved. Bull's mouth hung open in amazement. Red, hardly believing the daring of the brothers, was for once struck dumb.

It was old Jud who started it. He cried, "Git 'em without talk!" He rolled over, scrambling for a rifle which leaned against the wall of the cabin.

Mack had been watching that rifle out of one corner of his eye. He stepped aside now, swiftly, to Bull's left. His hand dipped, came up with the Colt. He held it, calling loudly: "Don't shoot! Wait!"

But Red Cantell was diving for his own gun and Bull was bringing the rifle around. The traditional fight of the Cantells was not to be denied, as Mack had known it would not. He had a clear choice, to kill or be killed. He fired his first shot at Jud Mason.

The old man paused in his struggle for the gun. He sighed once, grabbing his side. He lay there a moment, trying to recover from the shock of a .45 in his chest.

RED CANTELL cried: "Kill them!" His own gun, amazingly quick, was bucking in his hand. Grant went down on one knee, and for a moment his gun arm hung slack, steadying him lest he fall.

A film of red ran across Mack's vision for a split second. After all this, they had shot the kid! His trigger worked convulsively, and then the mask was gone and he saw more clearly than ever before in his life.

He saw Red Cantell and poured lead at the bandit leader. He saw the rifle of the big Bull coming around, ducked, and took one shot through his hat. Then he had cut down on the big man.

He counted his shots with care. He saw Red, on his knees, trying to get his gun up. He saw the durable Bull drag at his revolver, his rifle gone. He emptied his Colt at Bull, the toughest of them, firing it right into the big man's face. He saw the bandit topple backwards, knew then that he had finished him.

He dropped the Colt back into its holster. Red Cantell was holding onto the post of the porch, but he was still able to lift his weapon. He asked: "You've destroyed a dream, Mack Deal. You and—your—brother. But by God, now I'm taking you with me!"

Grant was white, trying to get his own weapon up, his hand staunching as best it could the blood oozing from his side. Jud Mason made a supreme effort with his last strength, bringing up the rifle. Grant yelled, "Look out, Mack!" and fired at Jud. He got the little man through the head.

Mack said softly, "I'm sorry, Red."

Then he jumped sideways. The wavering muzzle followed him. He whipped open his coat and the despised .38 came to his hand and never before did a gun butt feel so welcome to him.

Red triggered and bullets cut the grass at Mack's feet. He hesitated and Red brought the gun up higher, his hard face demoniac with the will to kill.

Mack pulled on the .38 reluctantly, aiming for the left breast pocket of Red's blue flannel shirt. A little puff of dust showed where his shot spatted.

Red Cantell gritted his teeth. The revolver dropped to the porch floor. He sagged there for a last moment, hanging on in a final effort to remain erect. Then, abruptly, he toppled.

Mack, through habit, reloaded his guns. It was like a bad dream, he thought dimly. It was seconds before his brain would function properly, before he realized again that his brother was badly hurt.

He went forward then, dropping to his knee. He said, "Kid! You all right, kid?"

Grant muttered: "I'm hit, but it could'a' been worse. . . ."

Mack got water. The wound was higher than he had thought. It had paralyzed Grant's muscles, but it was through the shoulder and not the lung. In a moment the kid could walk.

They stared about at the dead. Grant said, "The Cantell gang. Wiped out. I can't believe it, Mack. We gave them a square show. I expected to die, Mack, honest I did. I figured it was my punishment. I was all ready to die."

Mack said, "Now nobody knows you rode with them."

"Some people could guess," said Grant. "If I was accused."

"But no one will accuse you," said Mack. "It's one of those things. . . . We'll pack the loot in and I'll talk. You've paid today for anything you might have done."

It was unpleasant removing the belts from the dead men. It was even more distasteful to lay them out on the porch, in a row, and close their eyes with silver pieces, but Mack did it while Grant gathered strength for the trip back to Silo.

They walked out of the ravine and found their horses. It was a long, slow ride. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exit for a Banker

THE crowd followed the brothers, jamming the bank. Mack walked to the desk where George Oleson sat, pale-lipped, but still trying to smile. He laid the canvas sack on the desk top and said, "Count it, Oleson."

The banker's hands trembled, handling the money. He moistened his lips with his tongue and said, "You've—killed the Cantells?"

"All of them," Mack said.

Oleson's eyes flicked to Grant, went away again. He said, "They're having an election for sheriff tomorrow. Everyone thinks you'll run."

"I ain't a resident," Mack said coolly. "I think I'll accept the Marshal's job—first. It's been offered to me. Next election will be time enough for me to run."

Oleson said, "Your brother is going to stay?"

"Yeah," said Mack. "I thought you'd like to put him in the bank. He's had banking experience."

Oleson's smile disappeared almost entirely. But he said in a choked voice, "Anything you two want. Of course he can come into the bank."

The crowd was buzzing. Boyce said, "Then it's settled. We got a Marshal kin enforce the law. We kin find a good sheriff. Looks like a new deal fer old Silo!"

They cheered.

In the bank, Mack Deal was saying, "You're leavin', of course. Soon as Grant gets things figgered—like how you cheated the Terrys."

Oleson said emphatically: "No! Everything I own is here. I've worked hard for all this."

"You stole it," said Mack coldly. "You're worse than the Cantells."

Oleson said, "I won't go! You can't prove anything!" His lips drew back from his large, white teeth. He looked, Mack thought, like a locoed horse.

Mack said, "You'll go. Now or later—but you'll go. Because we had to kill the Cantells, who were better than you, and we'll find a way to kill you, too. But first we'll break you. We'll find out how you do your dirty work and expose you to the town. Then we'll hunt you down, as we hunted down the Cantells. You think you got a chance, Oleson?"

The banker raved, "You're a pair of bloody murderers! I've done nothing wrong. . . ."

Grant said, "No? How about the bank in Kansas? You stole the money and had it blamed on me until the Cantells took the records."

Oleson tried hard to get command of himself. He said placatingly, "I'm giving you a job. Can't we let bygones be bygones? There's plenty of money to be made here. We can get along, using our heads. Why, we can own this county among the three of us. . . ."

Grant cried suddenly: "Look out, Mack! He's trying for it!"

Mack had seen it in the crazed rolling of the man's eyes. He was signing his own death warrant, dragging that gun from the drawer of his desk. But Mack had no desire to start a career as a lawman by shooting the town's leading banker. He said, "Hold still, Grant!"

He hurled himself across the desk and grabbed the hand holding the gun. With a lightning motion he twisted Oleson's arm.

The banker gasped, "I'll kill you! I'll not give up my money!"

Mack said, "Go ahead and pull the trigger, Oleson."

Oleson made a convulsive motion. He squeezed the trigger of the gun. It went off, shattering the silence of the bank.

Oleson slumped in his chair. Blood ran down from the hole in his forehead. The cashier came running in, pale and shaken. "Mr. Oleson! What did he do? I saw you trying to prevent him, Mr. Deal! Oh, God! He's shot himself!"

Mack said sternly, "I guess you know of some irregularities which might have caused him to do so!"

The cashier backed away, trembling. "Er—Mr. Oleson was absolute boss here, Mr. Deal. After Mr. Terry died—"

Mack said, "Mr. Terry's heirs will want to look into the affairs of the bank. I suggest you prepare the records."

The crowd was returning. The cashier said,

suddenly alert, steady-eyed: "I think I know what you mean, sir. I imagine I can get the records ready. I'll only need to look at Oleson's books."

"At his house?" queried Mack. "Then get over there, now. Don't waste time standing around and talking about it!"

The cashier went out the rear door. Grant leaned weakly against the wall and said, "Mack, you're the darndest man for guessing right. . . ."

Mack was already facing the crowd. He said to them, "Mr. Oleson has had an accident—with a gun. His own gun. I guess you know what I mean."

Hacker lifted his vinegary face. He said, "I see he has. About time, too. He had me on the block next." The man grinned, for the first time in months. He said, "Killed hisself, huh?"

"He didn't miss," said Mack. "Get the coroner, will you?"

He pushed through the crowd, leading Grant. They walked down Ballard Street. The town looked good to Mack, its false fronts orderly and neat in their serried row. At the millinery shop he turned in.

Mrs. Terry rose from a chair. The two girls waited, saying nothing. Then Mack nodded and they all began to talk at once. After a while he was able to tell them: "You'll own the bank again. The cashier suspected Oleson's double dealing. With Grant to help look after your interests, you'll be on top again, I'm right sure."

Mrs. Terry said, "I'm going right over and tell that Hacker. . . ."

Mack said, "I wouldn't, if I were you, Mrs. Terry. Oleson had him over a barrel and he couldn't give credit because he owed the bank."

Mrs. Terry's eyes widened. "That's why he changed so! That Oleson was ruining the whole town, then! He had everyone at each other's throats! Oh the—the despicable rogue!"

Grant was sitting in the chair Mrs. Terry had just vacated and Irene was bringing him a glass of cold water. Alice was standing near the side door. Mack edged over and in a moment they were in the alley, and he was holding her hands.

She said, "Your brother seems—very nice."

"Irene seems to think so," agreed Mack dryly.

She said, "Mother will be very happy to get the bank back. Poverty doesn't become her, somehow."

Mack muttered, "You'll be a rich girl again, Alice. I'll just be City Marshal."

"That job won't take so much of your time," she sniffed. "Silo isn't a tough town. You can look after some cattle interests too, you know."

Mack murmured, "I suppose I can—for someone."

"For us!" she said with sudden warmth. "Women can't run a ranch."

He held tight to her hands. "But they can run a man," he grinned.

"I wouldn't want to," she sighed. "Not—not one like you, Mack."

"Okay," he said. He let go of her hands—so she could come into his waiting arms.

THE END

CHOICE OF THE DAMNED!

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STAR WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

I whip the door open and throw a gun onto him.

By BART CASSIDY

TENSLEEP, STAR-SMASHER

YEARS of hard runnin', coyote business an' dodgin' has brought home one hard fact to Missus Maxon's little boy, Tensleep. As sure as tomorrow's sun, the day will come when my number's up an' I'm handed the bill for payment. An' it looks like today's that day, with me nested in a den of rocks, bullets whisperin' my name yearnin'ly an' Sheriff Ausby Haigler an' his blood-sweatin' posse ranged in a tight circle all about me.

It's a time to think back on my sinful past, except I've got more pressin' things to ponder. Them possemen have been inchin' closer an' closer, keepin' me down with a rain of bullets, takin' advantage of the boulder-studded slope an' the impossibility of a man watchin' all sides at onee. I've had several chances to knock over a bounty-hunter, but I've wasted

Tensleep knew he would never be able to resist the plea of that pitiful, lonesome youngster in the hoosegow. . . . But resisting the strong law-arm of Sheriff Ausby Haigler would be a horse-pistol of another caliber!

the lead. Somehow I ain't ever sunk to the point where killin' a man is a pleasure, no matter how desperate I am.

An' I sure do hate these gents, recruited by Haigler in Harmonyville saloons. They caught me in Skumpa Canyon, on my way to Butch's old Robber's Roost, shot Glory Hawss out from under me an' drove me into the rocks with no more harm to me than a heart broken for the best of a long line of fine horses that have carried me out of danger, sharin' my lonely hours, my joys an' sorrows, an' givin' me a lovin' loyalty I couldn't expect from no man or woman in this world.

More than a few times during this bitter hard day, I've cried like a baby, an' it wasn't because of the blistering heat, the agony of thirst or the certain knowledge that they'd charge me sooner or later an' gun me down. My tears, an' I'm not ashamed of 'em, was shed for Glory, who's layin' down there in the willows, cold an' stiff. They killed him, them low-lived saddle bums that haven't anything better to do than chase after the bounty on the head of a feller that—well, never mind what he done.

The sun is settin' now an' I'm too tired an' hopeless to appreciate the coolness. With the fading light I'll only have to strain my eyes the harder. An' it don't help my spirits none to decide that when them dirty horse killers come, I'll send some of their souls to the hell where they belong. Yeah, when they come to take me, they'll get it.

Quails are calling from the brush within a minute after the guns grow silent. What's up? I swing a quick look around the circle, but nary a man moves from his covert. Have they given up an' drawn off? That don't look likely, seein' not one of 'em is scratched. Are they waiting for darkness to rush me? That's my guess as I try to relax. The minutes tick away. Everything is still. Dusk falls an' deepens. An' then, when the last light is fadin' in the west, a man's voice yells out.

"Tensleep! Hold your fire! I'm coming up to make medicine an' I'm leaving my guns behind. You hear me? This is Ausby Haigler hollerin'."

"Come up, Sheriff," I answer, weary. "But if this is a trick, I'll—"

"It's no trick, feller. I'm coming up."

He steps into the clear an' comes diggin' up the slope, his spurs chimin'. Somehow, I don't feel the same to'rds him, regardin' the shootin' of my Glory. An' that's because I've allus admired Haigler—a straight-from-the-shoulder lawman (so I've been told) who asked no odds from the owlhooters, an' gave none. Mostly, he's been only a name to me, an' a symbol. Now, in the half light, I've got a chance to study him.

He's a middle-size gent, straight as a gun barrel an' lithe as a cat. He's reached that time of life when he's stopped growin' at both ends an' is startin' to grow in the middle.

"Tensleep," he says, lookin' at nothin' at all, "I'll make a swap with you."

"Swap? What have I got to swap, Sheriff? An' what have you got?"

"If my information's correct," he drawls, "you've got more than a passin' acquaintance with the Red Butte Gang?"

"What if I say yes, Sheriff?"

"I've got some of that outfit in jail, Tensleep. I want somebody to look at 'em, identify 'em, an' make an oath before the Justice that they're Red Butte boys."

"I've got no reason to love that outfit, Sheriff," I tell him. "An' my conscience won't bother me to put them outa circulation. That's my end of the swap; what's yours?"

"When you've took care of that, Tensleep, you go free."

"Plumb afoot," I say, bitter.

"All right; I'll throw in a good horse."

"I keep my gun?"

"I'll go that far too, Tensleep. How about it?"

"Lead out," I tell him, an' never was I so relieved. "You've just found a witness."

He says, "good," gets up an' leads the way downhill. As I pass 'em, the possemen crouchin' behind the rocks get up, starin' at me hungrily, an' fall in behind. I get goose pimples along my spine. Whee-ew! I drop my hand to my gun an' somebody in the willows hollers: "Look out!"

The sheriff whirls, flashin' a draw that would shame nine-tenths of the tough young gunnies who brag about their speed. An' he ain't foolin'. His gun spits flame an' his bullets burns along my left side. I get my cutter out just in time to have one of them bounty hunters hit me with his shoulder an' knock me sprawlin'. I fall hard in that rough rock an' before I can get half organized, they land on me like hounds on a crippled coyote.

"Take him on your bronc, Pee-wee," the sheriff tells a scar-faced little hombre who's wearin' a deputy's badge. "An' tie him good. He's a slick one, that Tensleep, an' we don't want that thousand to slip through our fingers."

An' that miserable, double-crossin' blood-money grubber is the sheriff I've admired as a rare an' preferred type!

THE ride to Harmonyville is nothin' to remark on except that the main body of the posse seems to have slipped out an' gone home. There's only six beside the sheriff to take me to the jail, an' a shiftier-eyed, harder-bitten outfit I've never seen.

When Haigler opens the cell door an' shoves me in, he laughs an' says: "In here, Tensleep, you'll find some of the Red Butte boys. Look 'em over good so's you can keep your end of our bargain." Still laughing, he locks up an' bangs the outer door as he leaves the jail.

Half expectin' to find myself cooped in with some hard-case owlhooters who know me an' are convinced by the sheriff's words that I've planned to double-cross them, I stand just inside the door until my eyes are accustomed to the gloom. Then I make out the feller settin' on the cell cot—a slender, pitiful youngster, maybe sixteen, maybe less. His big round eyes are on me an' there is a quaver in his voice as he says: 'I'm sorry for any man to be here, yet I'm glad. It's been lonesome."

"You!" I gasp. "You're one of the Red Butte Gang?"

"Not really, Mister. I'm Stormy Brett. My dad was Tyree Brett, of the Lazy B. When he was killed—shot in the back—my mother died grieving. I had to go somewhere, and so I found the Red Butte Boys—and somethin' to eat."

"What," I ask, settin' on the cot beside him, "was wrong with stayin' with your dad's Lazy B?"

"His men ran me out of there, Mister. Tried to kill me."

"Whose men ran you out?"

"Haigler's. That sheriff's a bad man, Mister. He's living there now and there's nobody to dispute him . . . nobody except me."

"An' the Red Butte Gang," I add, ironic.

"Just me," he repeats, tight-lipped, an' falls silent. After a while he shakes a little bit an' I know he's cryin' in the terrible silent way that's worse than bawlin'. An' I suddenly realize that there's other things to be mourned over in this sad world than just my Glory Hawss. It makes me feel better, but not to'rds Ausby Haigler. I throw an arm about the boy's thin shoulders.

"Don't you worry, Kid. Just stick to your guns that you're not a member of that polecat Red Butte outfit. Who's going to testify against you? And when you get out . . . sa-a-ay, how-come you to be picked up and jailed by a man who's out to kill you?"

"Brody Blagg made me ride along to hold the horses while they robbed the Cedar City Mercantile." Stormy draws himself up, his eyes blazing. "My horse was shot. They didn't stop to pick me up. But . . . but they'll come to get me out."

"From what I know of them buzzards," I tell him, tart, "you're what the feller calls an optimist."

"They'll come for me," says the boy, bitter. He curls up on the cot, indicatin' he don't want no more talk about it. I lean back against the wall an' weariness ketches up with me an' I fall asleep.

SOMETHING wakes me up an' I set there achin' from my unnatural position an' sorta stiff with cold. I hold my breath an' wait for another sound like the one that woke me. It comes again—fingers rasped across window bars. A whisper: "Kid, awake?"

Stormy calls: "Waiting, Brody. What'll I do?"

"Wrap this catgut around them bars." It's Blagg, an' my blood pumps faster.

The Kid's on tiptoe at the window, taking a turn around the bars. The walls are adobe, thick, hard as rock. If them irons are bedded too deep. . . .

Stormy turns, his voice eager as a feller beggin' food. "You go first," he tells me. "I'll drop beside you an' we'll fork the pony they've fetched for me."

"No thanks." I recall my experience with Blagg. "I'll get a pony in town."

He grabs me, desperate. "Do like I say, Tensleep. Please!"

In his whisper I read fear an' kid loneliness. Stormy Brett don't belong with a man like Blagg. "I'm a lone wolf," I tell him. "What you're askin' is a lousy deal, an invite to murder. I can't touch it. Sure your cayuse will carry double?"

Some rider outside puts his pony against the bars an' they squeal, buckle an' thud against the ground. I buck the cot over, worm through the opening an' drop. A man, tall in the saddle, spurs up with a led horse. Then there's Blagg's voice. "Hop on, Kid. Le's go." I grunt, take the reins. I'm stirrupin' my boot when Stormy tumbles out. Blagg snaps: "Who the hell's that?"

He don't suspicion me till Stormy says: "It's me, Brody. I got another good man for you. He's—"

Blagg twists in the saddle an' I feel the whip of his eyes. "Yeah?" It's low, friendless. "Good, eh? Who are you, feller?"

"He's Ten—" begins Stormy, but I cut him off.

"Sut up, Kid. I can answer this hombre. I'm Gosling Jones, Mister, tougher'n anybody in yore outfit—tougher'n anybody in Utah. Doubt it? Want a demonstration?"

He stiffens, and slides a hand to his gun. "Yeah? We'll see about you when we reach camp. All right, boys."

Stormy swings up behind me an' we spur across lots, ford the crick an' gallop away—seven riders bunched around us. Stormy's lips find my ear. "Another mile," he whispers. "Road forks. Drop behind an' rein left. We gotta lose 'em."

I press his hand to tell him I understand. But when I drop behind, Blagg follers suit, ridin' free an' easy, brod face to'rds us, hand on his gun. An' that's the way it is all the way to the camp in the timbered hill pocket, where there's nothin' but a pile of firewood an' tarp-covered beds under the trees.

We light down, water the broncs at the spring an' picket 'em. It's plain this place ain't been used long. Somebody starts a fire an' Blagg chuckles. "Poke over an' enjoy some coffee, Jones. Then I'll test your toughness."

Stormy whispers: "Talk soft, Tensleep. He's a man-buster an' a killer."

I grunt, knowin' he can't imagine Blagg's surprise when I hit the fire. It's five years since he's laid eyes on me. At that time, he ran another Red Butte Gang on the Montana-Wyoming Line, west of the Big Horn. Same business—robbery, rustling, hell-raising. Blagg offered me sanctuary—for what never mind—at too steep a price. When I announced I was my own man, and that I didn't like him, his gang or their business, he called my hand.

We fought for an hour, with him too shaky to get offa the ground. Me, I had just enough left to get to my grounded gun before Blagg's men, totter to a horse an' ride off. You can bet Blagg ain't forgot that day.

I pull into the firelight, ready for anything. Blagg gives a start. "You!" he marks, an' I can see his mind reachin' back. "So you've had time to grow new horns, eh?"

His eyes glitter an' his big chest rises an' falls with emotion. I laugh. "You forget, Blagg, that I rode away from that swarray with you a-watchin' me from the ground."

"You landed a sneaker, Tensleep. That won't happen again." He grins, cruel. "Shuck yore equalizer an' square off. Rest of you gunnies keep hands off."

I toss my gun aside, confident. He attacks like before—a rampagin' bull with a hide full uh screw worms. I give back, takin' his blows on the chest, waitin' my chance. Encouragement is all he needs. He opens up wide, cockin' his right for the crusher. I sway an' tag his chin, jarring him. An' there he is—flesh for the sacrifice. It's too easy to believe.

I rap: "You don't live right, Brody," an' dust his jaw with all my weight.

He teeters back a dozen steps, like drunk. His fists are pinwheelin' but there is a glassy look in his eyes. I foller him, landin' a dozen lulus, showin' his men one artistic beatin'-up. What holds him erect I can't figger.

Blagg parts his bloody lips. "Pike, Ranzo, Sal!" he bellers. "He's got me foul. Buffalo him!" Light fades from his eyes; he moans, crumples.

One of his men leaps at me. I swerve, reach him with one an' put him down. The rest hesitate an' before they can organize their minds, Stormy has caught up my gun. "One move," he pipes, "and I'll start me squirtin' lead. Drop your guns an' reach!"

They grin, hardlike, and ground their cutters. "Gimme that iron, Kid," I scold, rubbin' my knuckles. "An' tell me how-come these high-flyers are so anxious to hang onto you."

"Dad never banked in Harmonyville," he says. "These fellers think I know where he buried his money."

"Do you?" I ask.

"Look," he flares. "I never pried into Dad's affairs. All I want is to get shut of these outlaws before they start torturin' me."

"So-o-o," I croon, an' the Red Butte boys cringe as I scowl at them. "I'm surprised that you gents sink so low as to practice Injun methods on a helpless boy. Why don't

you wrap yourselfs in blankets, take squaws an' build teepees?"

"'Twasn't our idea," growls one. "When you ride with Brody, you do like he says."

"Then you don't believe in torturin' boys, eh?"

"No part of it." They blurt it out in one voice.

"Fine," I grin. "'Cause now you won't object to redeemin' yourselfs an' ridin' to blast Sheriff Haigler offa the Lazy B, will yuh?"

They swap troubled glances. One says, "Haigler's bad, Jones. An' he's never beyond sight of itchy-fingered gun-dogs. What's in it if we're lucky an' win?"

"Glory, boys," I grin. "An' mebby a share of Tyree Brett's money."

They brighten. Stormy cries: "Don't take no chances for—for me, Pens . . . Jones. They're right about Haigler."

"Hush up, Kid," I order, an' start talkin' turkey to them owlhooters. An' when I'm finished, they know I'm their new boss. I convince 'em Stormy's business comes first—unless somebody wants what Blagg got.

Minutes later, we set out for the Lazy B, leavin' Blagg sleepin' the sleep of the slugged. Stormy rides at my stirrup, chin on his chest, lips pulled down. His expression tells the story. He figgers he's jumped out of the fryin' pan into the fire.

AROUND, yellow moon's a quarter over when we top a ridge an' ease down a cedar slope to'rds the Lazy B buildings. The ranch is asleep. From the cottonwood gloom, not a light can be seen. "There she lies," I tell the boys. "The big gamble. You can buy chips now or draw your bets an' high-tail. The fewer to split with, the bigger the cut. How do you want it?"

For seconds it's fear against love of money. Then, one by one, they nod. They'll buy in an' take outlaw luck, whatever it is.

I give the word an' we rim along the timber fringe till we're opposite the side of the house. Giving sharp orders, I pick up a cup-size boulder and ride across open ground. A dog begins to bark an' I hear somebody speak sharply inside.

I holler: "Hey, Haigler! They say you want Tensleep Maxon. If true an' if you're wide enough across the pants, come get me! I'm hell on wheels an' you're too damned careful a double-crossin' sidewinder to take a chance. Come on out!"

I spur around the house at a run, toss my brickbat through a front window, rein about an' gallop back. Leavin' the pony with the boys, I rattle spurs to a big tree a hundred feet out from the front door. The house is buzzin' like a tipped-over beehive, Haigler cursin' and hollerin' for his men to get me, them cursin' him back that they're hurryin' fast as they can an' why the hell don't he go out after this Tensleep gent personal?

Ausby Haigler's cussin' 'em out, ragin' at the deputy he left in charge of the jail an' workin' hisself into a lather generally. But nobody seems anxious to leave the house.

"Come out, Haigler!" I yell. "I'm the old wormy bull from Bitter Crick. I'm cactus fed an' my horns is filed to sharp points. Sheriffs is my favorite meat an' I gulp 'em without salt!"

It infuriates him. He spits out a string of profanity, and bellers another mess of orders at his reluctant men. Then a door bangs at the back of the house an' then I see him darting across the yard to the fringe of timber, with the house between him an' the watchful Red Butte boys.

Haigler's example is all that's needed to set his hirelings in motion. They come pourin' out the back door after him, split apart an' come tearin' around the rear corners of the house, eight at least, huggin' the shadow under the wide eaves, their six-shooters bared.

"Come on, you mangy polecats!" I taunt 'em. "It ain't how many guns you got; it's where you plant yore lead. Step up like men an' take it! Who wants it first?"

They start crackin' caps an' their bullets slash through the timber where I'm standin' behind the bole of a big cottonwood. As their fire slacks off, I fade away into the darkness, movin' slow an' careful to'rds the place I saw the sheriff disappear.

One of Haigler's men, havin' reached a front corner of the house, lets loose a high Rebel yell an' leaps into the moonlight, chargin' the spot I was occupyin' a moment before. The others foller him an' then they're all fair targets in the moonlight, their necks stuck out like mallard ducks as they look for me.

It's the time Stormy's waited for. His shrill, boyish yell splits the night. A horse nicker's loud, down where the Red Butte boys are waiting. The sheriff's men pause, swing around. The fringe of the timber spouts flame an' lead. They can't miss. Haigler's plug-uglies, caught far from cover, are spinnin', writhin', crumplin' to the ground for keeps. An' through all the turmoil of blastin' guns, battle cries an' croakin' moans of dying men, Stormy's yellin' like a triumphant Comanche. This is the hour he has lived for.

Firin' dies out for lack of targets. The Red Butte boys come leggin' it into the moonlight to loot the bodies, ignorin' the chance there's still guns planted behind the house walls, the damned greedy fools.

But no gunshot breaks the sudden ashin' silence. I'm movin' ahead, every sense keyed to the breakin' point. Ahead of me a twig snaps. I halt, straining my eyes. There is no

further sound, an' it comes to me that Haigler has just cleared the point from which he can look out there an' see his men layin' dead in the moonlight. It must have froze him 'cause it seems like five minutes pass before he moves again. An' when he moves, it's at a run, away from me. But I'm follerin', holdin' the twenty-five paces between us, waitin' for a glimpse of him.

I get that glimpse as he cuts out of the timber, hits the corral fence an' claws it back to'rds the barn. I lift my gun an' let it down again. My idea of sport ain't never bin to shoot a feller in the back.

I put on another burst of speed, rappin' a stop order. It speeds him up an' he ducks into the stable. It's a gambler's chance an' a poor risk, but I hit that door goin' at my best clip an' duck inside. A gun blares almost in my face, the bullet snarlin' past my ear. There ain't much of Haigler showin' an' that's a shadow behind the end of the stall wall. Knowin' stalls are built of inch stuff, I blat: "This is for Tyree Brett, you renegade," an' put a slug into the boards.

HAIGLER cries a raging curse an' then he's down on his face in the aisle, beatin' the dirt with his hands. I stand there coverin' him till all motion ceases, then I walk over an' touch him with my boot toe. His flesh is soft, unresistin', an' I know he's dead. An' suddenly the night seems cleaner, finer.

There's a horse in the stall an' he's kickin' an' snortin' an' strainin' at his tie rope. I speak to him an' he quiets an' I go in an' stroke his sleek hide, workin' up to his arched neck. He quits tremblin' as I croon to him. I feel his legs. They're slender an' hard-muscled an' well-tapered. Rememberin' I'm afoot, I strike a match an' look at him. Cripes! My eyes light up like a forest fire. He's a long barreled claybank dun, with a black line down his back an' pretty little zebra stripes on his upper front legs. His head's small an' his eyes are big an' round an' full of challenge. He is a gelding an' somewhere about three years old. A whole lot of horse an' a mortal comfort to a man grievin' for as fine a horse as ever was foaled.

"Fella," I tell him. "You got a long ways to go before yore pretty hide holds the stuff Glory Hawss was made of, but for my money you rate the workout. Let's get acquainted."

There's a Navajo saddle blanket an' a fine silver mounted, full stamped Porter saddle on the rack. I rig the claybank, swing onto his back an' ride him out of the barn an' over to the house where lights are showin'.

The Red Butte boys are gathered in the parlor, which looks anything but homelike after the weeks Haigler an' his renegades have occupied it. The Red Butte boys are lookin' around for stuff to take away. Several of 'em have rolled up small Indian rugs for saddle blankets.

"Put that stuff down," I order. "You ain't leavin' here with a thing Stormy don't give you of his own free will."

They obey, sullenly, an' then there's a step at the door leadin' into another room. Stormy stands there, his eyes suspiciously moist, a little tan bag in his hands. He moves to'rds me, payin' no heed to the others. "Your ideas worked perfect, Tensleep," he says, sorta shaky. "I lied to you about my dad's money. You saved it for me and I—I want you to have this."

I take the bag, an' boy, is it heavy! I untie the string an' I'm lookin' at gold—fives, tens an' twenties. "That's nice of you, Kid," I tell him, husky. "An' if you believe I gave you something, it's only right that there be payment. For value received. . . ." I take out a five, pocket it an' dump the coins into a pile on the floor. Then I squat there with them outlaws eyein' me hungry an' sort it out into six equal piles. I motion them to help themselves, which they do, without a thank you or go to hell.

"But you, Tensleep," protests Stormy. "I wanted you to have—"

"I'm paid," I tell him, "except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"The lineback claybank in the barn."

He looks surprised, then grins. "Zebra's mine," he says. "I raised him from a colt. Sheriff Haigler's been ridin' him an' he's yours if you want him. But Haigler won't take all this smilin'. I don't mind tellin' you he wasn't among them dead men out yonder."

"Haigler's lyin' in the barn, Kid," I say, happy I can set his mind at rest. "All we gotta figger on now is to keep the revenge of the law away from your door. . . . Listen! Maybe that's it now."

I jerk my gun an' fade into the dark hall. A rider is just alightin' at the rack an' the easy, confident way Brody Blagg's approachin' the half open door, I know he's sure of a welcome from the crooked sheriff. "It's Brody, Ausby," he hollers. "I'm set to take you up on that offer, an' to hell with them damned men of mine! They beat up on me an'—" Just then he notices the huddled forms scattered across the yard. "Sa-a-ay, what the hell's the score here?"

I whip the door open an' throw a gun onto him. "Welcome, Blagg. Come right on in. Those are Haigler's men out yonder. The sheriff's layin' in the barn, just as dead. Come in. I want talk with you."

His men have come up behind me an' one barks: "We'll take him offa your hands, Tensleep. And what we'll do to that double-

crossin' coyote won't lull women an' children to sleep."

"That can wait," I snap. "Fetch him inside."

THEY do, an' Stormy gets paper an' pencil an' with my gun in his ribs, Brody Blagg writes down that he ambushed Sheriff Haigler an' his deputies in Sunset Pass, between the Lazy B an' Harmonyville. He signs it "Brody Blagg, Chief of the Red Butte Gang."

"Now, boys." I look his eager-eyed outlaws over. "From here on out, the Red Butte Gang will be wanted for real important money. When you've settled with Blagg, you better split up an' hunt your private holes. An' when the manhunt dies down, take my advice an' live straight. In the long run, you'll be far ahead. An' remember this: I'm gonna be lookin' after Stormy. If you get any ideas about messin' with him, just remember I'll be after you till hell freezes over—the toughest damned man an' the fastest gunhand in Utah."

"Don't worry about us, feller," says a dark complected man who's their spokesman. "We're all tired of barely eatin' while Blagg gets rich. We're fed up an' all anxious to get back to honest cowpunchin'. We're beholdin' to you. Anything else you'd want us to do?"

"One thing, boys. Tote Haigler an' his renegades into Sunset Pass before you clear out. That's gonna be a mystery slaughter the law ain't due to solve. An' good luck to you."

I shake hands with 'em an' stand there watchin' 'em lead Blagg out. One of 'em has tied a hangman's knot an' slipped it over his head. He takes one backward look at me an' his eyes are the most awful things in the world to look at—the eyes of a coward who's scairt to die.

While they're fiddlin' at the corral, loopin' the horses of Haigler's men an' ropin' on the bodies, I'm rackin' my brains tryin' to find ways of comfortin' Stormy. He ain't makin' a sound, just standin' there lookin' at me, big tears rollin' down his freckled cheeks. Loneliness is devilin' him. "Stay with me, Tensleep," he gulps. "I—I'll pay you well, if you will."

"Wish I could, button, but I'd be as sick here as you are for your kinfolks. Homesick for the windy ridges where the spruces sing to me; sick for swimmin' water an' open range, with the stars for a roof an' the ground for a bed. Only difference between you an' me is that you're young enough to get over your sickness, and I ain't. How much more of that money is there?"

"Quite—quite a lot."

"Get it out. I'm ridin' to Harmonyville an' seein' you registered in a hotel room. Tomorrow you're puttin' it into the bank an' goin' at the ranch business substantial. You're even going to the newspaper an' give 'em the story of how Haigler killed your dad an' taken over the ranch. An' how when the sheriff was killed, you went back an' got the money your dad hid in the house."

"Newspaper?" Stormy looks scairt. "But why, Tensleep?"

"So all the tough jaspers on the loose won't be droppin' in here to put the squeeze on you. Come on! Get that money an' le's go."

He ducks away an' the Red Butte boys ride away. Presently I help Stormy load his gold—an' there must be close to a hundred pounds of it—onto a pony. Then we light out for town. As we ride, Stormy's hummin' a little tune he don't realize he's got in him. An' I'm glad, for I've got a little tune in my heart too. I'll never forget my dead Glory Hawss—that would be plumb impossible. But the animal I'm straddlin' has a way that I like an' I must set a saddle accordin' to his best ideas. He's tossin' his pretty neck proud, sidlin' his hind quarters first one way, then another. His thin nostrils is flarin' as he keens the night breeze an' his pin ears are prickin' forward like he too has been homesick to go places an' see things.

Yep, I'm mounted again an' the world is a better place an' a freckled-faced kid is slowly risin' out of the mudhole of utter hopelessness. Get along, Zebra. Cripes, that's got a funny sound!

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Dime Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1945. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Dime Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street 17, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of October 1945. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 16, Register's No. 363-W-6. (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

The Federales were coming! But behind his Cousin Pancho's sturdy *dorados*—quite a ways behind them!—was dashing "Lieutenant" Pepe Amalia. . . . Yet, how could a worn-out old crow, like the Grandfather, fathom the strategic genius of a—

RUNAWAY HERO!

The ragged *soldados* jumped smartly to the old man's commands.

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

THE fragrance of peace was upon the land of the *saguaro* and the *cholla*. Tyranny and just revolution were but specters of the past. The days of the military were done. A government of the people was again in the city of Mexico and the good Francisco Madero was its *presidente*. The sword was once more forged into the plowshare. And Pepe Amalia, born a humble man of the soil, was onee again happy.

Pepe eyed the eight neatly uniformed *dorados* before him. The sun was hot. It had been a small drill they had just finished, but it had been brisk, for Pepe was a man who did his duty, and a few of the little company had wilted.

"Attention!" Pepe snapped importantly. The wilt disappeared. "Dismissed!"

The *dorados* broke gratefully for the shelter of their own quarters. Pepe turned and walked across the compound toward the comfortable house a grateful *Madre Mejico* had built for his cousin, Pancho Villa, in this pleasant and arid valley out of the city of Parral. Pepe paused at the steps to flick dust from the high polish of his boots. The grandfather lazed in a low chair on the veranda of the house.

"Stuffed pig!" the grandfather said. "The uniform would look better filled with straw. 'Attention!' 'Dismissed!' You make me sick. Truly an insult to the blood of the family that sired a general of the people—a Villa!

When there is war Pepe hides in the brush and cries he is a farmer. But comes peace, than he is a soldier. Fagh!"

Pepe winced. The grandfather possessed an acid tongue and no respect for the fact that, when the cousin Pancho had grown weary of lazing on this ranch and had decided upon a vacation trip to the States United, he had chosen Pepe above all others to keep this ranch in order and his honor guard of *soldados* in proper drill. Besides, the grandfather was a wise one and fearless and what he spoke was too close to the truth. Much too close.

It was a fact that the glory of the military was as ashes to Pepe, that battle sound was no music in his ears. But despite the cringing of his soul and frequently much against his will he had served Pancho often in the course of the great revolution. And was it not the practice of generals to reward the faithful when the fighting was done? Was it not fitting that Pancho should have appointed his humble cousin major-domo of his ranch while he himself went pleasuring in foreign lands? A verity. A certainty. And whether or not the blood of the military pulsed in his veins, it was necessary for the major-domo of so fine a ranch to maintain the men and equipment upon it in high trim. Otherwise would there not be gossip?

Perhaps in the *pulqueria* at Parral idle tongues would speak. The great Villa had gone off and left the handsome gift Mexico had given him in the hands of a clumsy man of the plow. The great Villa scorned the gift of his countrymen. The great Villa was an ungrateful dog. Such talked must not be. No village prattle must be allowed to dim the lustre of the cousin's greatness. Besides, the grandfather was but a thorn, to be plucked from the flesh and forgotten.

"The old crow," Pepe said severely, "croaks when he can no longer fly."

The grandfather made an obscene face. "Old crow it is, eh?" he growled. "Without a feather on my back I could out-soldier you, my little squeaking turtle! But into the house with you. A messenger has come from the city of Mexico to speak with Pancho. It is news of importance which the stubborn fool will not tell to me. He asks, 'Are you the major-domo?' I give him no and he will not speak. Go; listen, while I laugh in my belly. What can you do with an important message?"

Pepe scowled at the grandfather and stepped into the house. A tall man, dusty with riding and grim of face, was pacing nervously the length of an inner room.

"Lieutenant Amalia, senor," Pepe said stiffly. "You have a message for the general?"

The tall man ran swift eyes over Pepe and shuddered slightly. His lips thinned. "A message for all Mexico, rather!" he snapped. "A message to break her heart. The men of the old government have banded together again, and blood runs red in the palace of the president. Medero has been assassinated!"

Pepe blinked. If a volcano had suddenly thrust its head up from the corn field beyond Pancho's house he could not have been more shaken. This tall man's words shattered in an instant all the goodness which life had held of late. Madero—the kind man, the good man, the very essence of the hopes of Mother Mexico—dead at the hands of the traitors of the old government!

THE bitter campaigning, the magnificent bravery of the little ones who had followed Pancho from the deserts of Chihuahua to the very hill of Chapultepec, lost in a moment. This was indeed news to set hearts to bleeding!

"This word must reach the general immediately," the tall man said. "You know where he is?"

Pepe nodded dumbly. "In the village called El Paso, somewhere within the States United."

"There are horses in the corral?" the tall man urged. "Have one saddled for me. I have ridden far for Villa. I must go on."

Pepe shook lethargy from him. A vestige of briskness crossed his face. "Seguro! At once, comrade!" he agreed. "And one man alone cannot carry such a message. I, who am cousin to Villa, will ride with you!"

The tall man shook his head impatiently. "I have come this far well enough," he said. "There are other duties. You wear the general's uniform. You are of the military. You are needed here. As I came up through Chihuahau, wherever I found a village where there were friends, where were loyal little ones like those who once made up the general's army, I told them of the news. They ride this way, to meet here, by one's and two's and three's. A soldier must remain to begin the making of a new army. And always there is the danger of the old government man. Already they will have their old *Federales* troops in saddle. And what wiser move for them to ride hard and strike first at the headquarters of the man who must once more attempt to crush them? The need for you is here, Lieutenant Amalia, to save what is left of Mexico's hopes until the general returns!"

Pepe spread his hands. The great urge was in him to spill out the truth. He was Lieutenant Amalia by courtesy only. Of the military he knew less than nothing. And of the *Federales* troops, whom Pancho had so skillfully fought, he had only a shaking fear. The thought of powdersmoke upon his clean and peaceful air had already set his belly to churning. But there was such a look upon the face of the tall messenger from the City of Mexico

that he knew his words would go unheeded. Despondent to the depths of despondency, quaking as only a humble man of the soil and a true coward could quake, he stepped into the doorway and shouted orders for the *dorados* to prepare a fresh, swift horse for the man who would ride on northward in search of the mighty cousin.

The tall man ate swiftly and departed. By the time he was gone many little funnelings of dust were fanned along the horizon. Part of these, Pepe knew, were churned up by the little ones—the men of the arroyos and the valleys and the sun-drenched villages—the *dorados* out of which Pancho had once fashioned an army. They were pouring in toward the general's ranch. But the general was not here. Only his cousin. Only Pepe Amalia. And who could know but what one of those approaching towers of dust did not hang above a smartly drilled and soulless company of Federal cavalry, riding vengefully to destroy a new revolt before it was born? Riding vengefully to wipe out the last vestige of Villa's remembered power—the last drop of his blood?

Mother of Mercy, what evil days the course of a man's life could lead him into! Pepe hunched miserably on the veranda steps and held a heavy head between his hands.

The grandfather had shamelessly listened in the doorway while the tall messenger from the city of Mexico delivered his terrible message. Now he came over to Pepe, prodded him scornfully with his toe, and cackled mockingly.

"What do you think of the polish on your boots now, my little buzzing bottle-fly? Will bright leather and clean *pantalones* make a Villa of a clod from the fields? What of Mexico, now? The motherland of us all, entrusted to the shaking hands of a *pobre* who wails for his plowshare and his hoe!"

This was savage cruelty, and Pepe cringed inwardly. And a blind anger against the grandfather rose within him. It was enough to be forced to endure the burden of an old man who scorned the labor of the fields, but to be flayed by an elder of one's own blood for a prank played by merciless fate was too much. Still, the grandfather was agile, despite his age, and he kept near him a knotted ironwood stick with which he could swing dexterously when there was need to defend himself. Anger, therefore, must be contained.

Pepe rose slowly. Already the closest of the funnels of dust hung above a little company of men pouring into the lower end of the ranch yard. With grave misgivings, but with the bravest show of military spirit he could muster, Pepe went forth to meet him. And before they could get the dispiriting news that Pancho, their mighty leader, was not here waiting for them, Pepe divided them into platoons and gave orders for drilling to begin immediately. Even a man of peace could see that if war was come again, then the training of an army was a matter of prime importance.

But these were a different kind of *soldado* than the lazy honor guard the Madero government had assigned to the cousin Pancho in the days of his retirement. These were men who saw the motherland again prostrate beneath a tyrant's heel. These were the peons—the *pobres*, the little ones from the wastes of Chihuahua—who had made war once and understood the language of the sword. After one bungling attempt, Pepe saw he could do nothing with these. They would laugh him from the cousin's ranch and when Pancho did not shortly appear they would depart, disheartened, to seek another leader. They would depart and leave the ranch—all that Pancho had gained, as well as the grandfather and Pepe himself—to the mercy of the *Federales* who must certainly soon arrive.

An inspiration hit Pepe. A brilliant solution. He called the grandfather to him and offered him his own second best tunic.

"Behold, old one," he said severely, "in time of great need even the dull tools must be used. A lieutenant does not drill the soldiery. A commandant barks orders only in battle. For drill is needed a sergeant. In the name of the mighty cousin and for the safety of *Madre* Mejico, I give you a rank of three stripes. You have boasted of your wisdom in such matters. Show it to me. Make these *pobres* from the arroyos into *soldados*—into *dorados* fit to ride with Pancho Villa!"

IT WAS a bold stroke. The grandfather grew a foot in height. He gripped his ironwood stick as a rifle. He walked with light step. And he moved of his own accord into the brightness of the sun, a thing he had avoided for more years than Pepe could remember. The high, cracked, mocking voice took on a deeper timbre and the ragged *soldados* out of the cactus hills of Chihuahua jumped smartly to the old man's commands.

Thus was the ordering of an army accomplished, and for some days Pepe felt a great satisfaction with his own wisdom. For the one duty which remained to him was the wearing of his own bright uniform about the house and the assuming of a look of dignity and business when any of the *soldados* were about. During these days Pepe was happy. And it seemed likely, now, that when the messenger from the city of Mexico returned from the States United with Pancho, the mighty cousin would be pleased with the military air of his rancho and the framework of the army which had been erected in his absence against his coming need. It seemed like-

ly, and there was this thing which was true of Pancho Villa; let a man serve him well, and that man was rewarded. And where should the reward go in such a case as this but to the lieutenant he had left as majordomo of his ranch?

However, passing days brought no word of Pancho. More *dorados* poured in from the hills and the grandfather's labors lasted from rising sun to setting sun. And time galled heavily upon Pepe. For had not the tall messenger pointed out that troops of the men of the government would be riding behind him and that they would strike first at this haven the good Madero had given to the general who had fought for his cause so bravely? It was one thing to train troops. This the grandfather could do, and well. But should the *Federales* come before Pancho's return from the north, the command would be for no aged and infirm sergeant. Of a certainty the lieutenant who was major domo of the ranch would be forced to take to the field in the face of the enemy for the glory of his blood and Mexico.

This was Pepe's fear. He lived with it. It spoke to him from dark corners and even from his pillow in the middle of the night. It was whispered on the wind and its echoes were even in the laugher of the *dorados* when the day's work was done and there was comradeship about the fires of their camp below the house. Pepe looked long to the north and muttered many urgent prayers. But on the morning of the eighth day after the arrival of the messenger from the city of Mexico, the blow fell.

An outpost sentry, cannily established as a part of his routine of drill by the grandfather, rode, in mad haste, to the headquarters.

Federales!

Nor was it a false alarm, conjured out of the eagerness of a *soldado* to serve his country and his general. To the south and east a veritable storm cloud of dust lay low across the land. And even Pepe, who had no proper knowledge of such matters, could tell that under it rode the purposeful, grim horsemen of the enemy. The grandfather came to him in haste.

"Chicken!" he scoffed. "Small burro! Pigskin! Behold an evil day and listen well to my words. A curse upon the senility of the ancient! I cannot ride a soldier's saddle in these days. My body fails me. Yet there must be a leader. Wretched choice that it is, there is only you. So you will not think for yourself. You will do nothing I have not told you. Understand this, the *soldados* we have here are now accustomed to command. There is only to issue the words and they will obey. Attend carefully, now. When the *Federales* have reached the lower meadow, where there is no shelter, you will send this unit with the command, 'Wheel right and charge!' You will send this unit to flank with the command, 'Wheel left in broken column of two's!' You will send this unit—"

The grandfather spoke swiftly, earnestly. Unfamiliar terms leaped from his lips like sparks from a honing stone. Pepe stared at the meadow and tried to follow the plan the grandfather was building for that place, but he could think only of the thundering hoofs which would shortly rend the sod and the blood which would stain the crushed blades of grass. He tried to listen to the grandfather's words but he could only hear the brazen song of rifles, the high yells of the wild *dorados,* and the ring of singing sabres.

Thus, when the grandfather prodded him into the saddle of a waiting horse, he was a dazed and fearful man, riding as in a dream at the head of a pitifully small company of *probres* toward the racing, sweeping might of the approaching *Federales.*

They saw the enemy soldiery enter the lower end of the meadow the grandfather had chosen for a battleground. Some feeble, unknown instinct of the military told him that now had come the time to shout as Pancho would have shouted. Now was come the time for a small man to rise to greatness. Now was the moment of glory. But he was as a folded grain sack—empty.

The *Federales* commander, evidently sensing the disorganization facing him, did not bother to deploy his forces. He held them together, coming straight toward the heart of Pepe's band. Suddenly smoke appeared above the enemy, and rifles spoke. Death sang angrily in the air. And his paralysis left Pepe.

"Pancho!" he murmured. "Pancho, where are you—" And then, out of his inner agony, his voice rose clearly, a clarion trumpet call.

"Wheel right! Company Five, broken column of two's! Company Four, wheel left! Charge! Right oblique! Left oblique!"

THE commands issued from his lips in a flawless rhythm. And strange were their results. His company split into segments at his back. They veered in scattered directions. More than one described a complete circle. Pepe reined up his horse, dazed and desperate, but he did not check the flow of commands issuing from his lips. Every term the grandfather had used leaped in thundering tones across the battleground. Others followed, terms picked up and vaguely remembered from the earlier wars. Like an emptying bucket, Pepe poured them forth.

The company of *dorados* which had been grouped so tightly behind him, were now no more than half a hundred little scatterings of men, riding wildly about the meadow. And the effect of this upon the *Federales* was strange

to behold. They, also, broke up, apparently without orders of their officers, and obviously intent upon running down the *dorados*, man for man. The meadow had become a bedlam.

Pepe sat stiffly on his horse, unable to move. He closed his eyes against the carnage certain to occur. This was the way he won himself glory in the eyes of the general, his cousin. This was the way he struck a blow for *Madre* Mejico. The hurried, earnest counsel of the grandfather had left him.

Bullets sang in the morning air. Men died. Others shouted in the heat of battle. Pepe sat still in his motionless saddle, waiting for the touch of death which would save him the dishonor of looking in the end upon the havoc he had wrought. But death was unkind and sent no summons. The sounds of battle reached an incredible pitch, then sharply declined. And with that decline a familiar sound rose above the dying din—a sound Pepe had given over hope of ever hearing again. It was the great and tremendous bellowing with which a Villa relayed orders to his little ones.

Pepe opened the corner of one eye. There, with the tall man from the city of Mexico beside him, was Pancho. And the cousin was riding through the milling battle, his forces gathering behind him once more in orderly form. The cousin was, Pepe saw, riding in his direction, and it seemed suddenly wiser to ride swiftly in another direction than to sit and die, for in anger Pancho could make a man die most unhappily.

But it was said in Chihuahua that no man could escape a Villa and it was true. The mighty cousin rode alongside Pepe and caught at the bridle of his horse. The animal halted before it had fairly began to run, and with craven heart, Pepe stiffened his shoulders to face his just desserts.

What he faced, instead, was a terrific clap on the back which nearly lifted him from his saddle. Then Pancho's great voice was booming in his ears.

"What a soldier! What a general! Pepe, my rooster, I love you!"

Pancho paused for breath. Pepe blinked. "A stroke of genius," Pancho thundered on. "Confusion—the best weapon of all. Ha! From the hill I saw the *coronel* of the *Federales*. This way—then that way—then this way again! A big company—then a lot of little companies—then just some *soldados* riding around."

Pancho roared with laughter. He wiped at his eyes. "What orders! Left, right—up, down! The poor *coronel!* Pepe, my little one, tonight I get you drunk, for a fact!"

There was more. Pepe glanced at the front of the house. The grandfather was on the veranda, striding up and down in a fury and beating the walls of the house. It seemed strange. Or perhaps the old one could not stomach genius in one he had so scorned.

In fact, the ways of the military were strange, as were the course of battles, but it was a heartening thing to know that an humble man could attain glory and that the first blow for the new revolt had been struck cleanly if not with sureness.

"I hope you brought whiskey from the States United," Pepe told Pancho. "For I grow weary of *pulque*. It makes me sick."

Sound The Call For Death!

A defeated Confederacy had sadly laid its arms to rest, and the long war had ended. . . . But for Llano, Texas, the bugle call was yet to sound—summoning a gallant band of die-hards who were ready to follow their daring leader through blazing guns, and on to a second Alamo!

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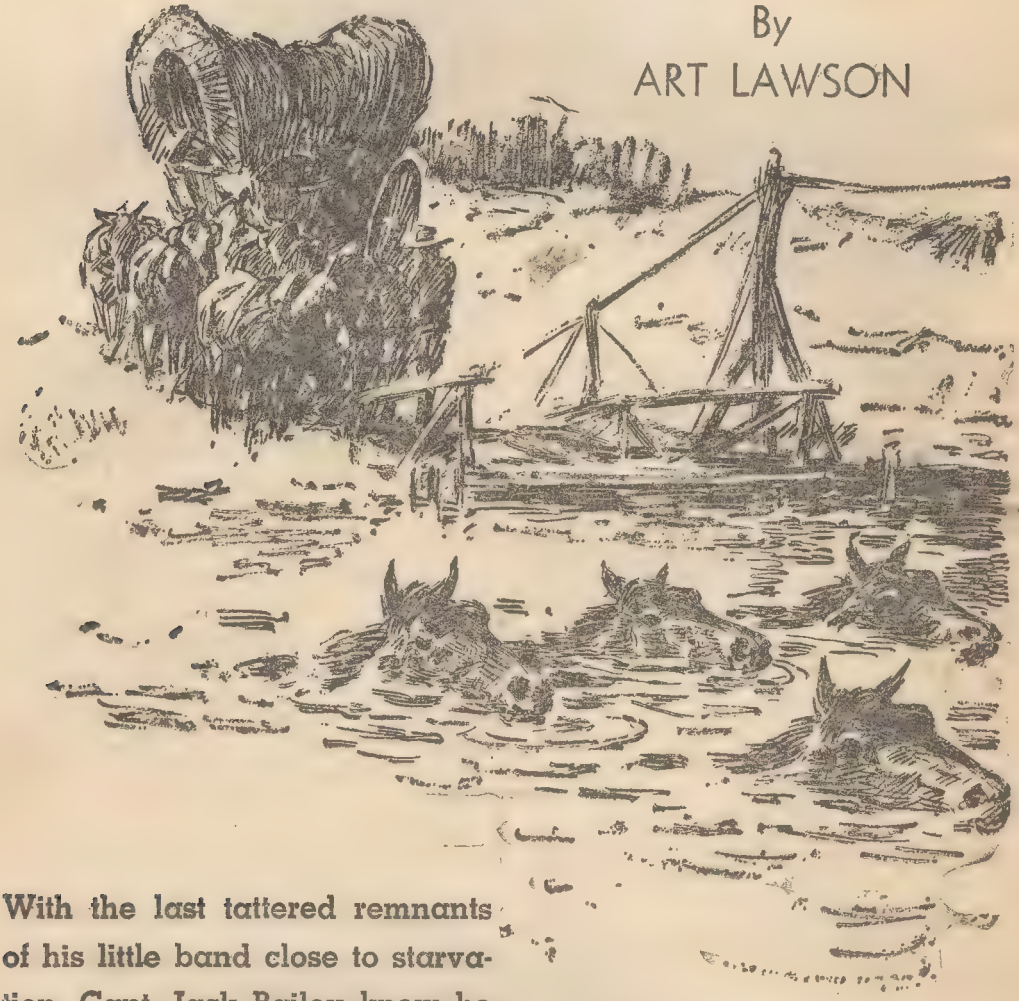
NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

GUN-TRAP AT REBEL

Colorful Novelette of Guerrilla War

By
ART LAWSON



With the last tattered remnants of his little band close to starvation, Capt. Jack Bailey knew he must strike at those mysterious night-skulking Conestogas crossing at Morgan's Ferry. . . . But what could he use to bait his trap for those shifty damnyankee guerrillas—except his own blood and body?

CHAPTER ONE

Ferry to Hell

THAT was the summer when the North was winning the war in the South and the South was winning in the North. General Grant had crossed the Mississippi to put down a siege around Vicksburg while the Confederates under General Lee moved into Pennsylvania in the hopes of dealing a knock-out blow against the Union. These were the big campaigns; but in the swamps of the Arkansas and along the sycamore-timbered creeks of the Persimmon Hills the war had

RIVER

The scow stopped moving as it pointed its bow into the current.

degenerated into a grim battle for simple survival. Southern troops cut off by Admiral Porter's fresh-water navy were starving and desperate—and among them was a little band of raiders led by Captain Jack Bailey.

Captain Jack was far ahead of his men scouting the Hatchet River when he came to the deeply-rutted road leading down to the crossing. He was surprised to find that the ferry operator was a girl.

"Me and my mule are broke," he told her. "We want to cross the river."

"You're all broke," she said. Her dark eyes studied his lean face. He was rather taller than average, with a young look to his eyes though his hair and beard were streaked with gray. There was a furrow along his left temple where a rifle ball had nicked him. The girl added: "All kinds of folks are crossing this river. There's deserters coming through every day—Johnny Rebs heading for Mexico and Yankees pointing their noses to California. And they're all broke."

The girl's expression was guileless. She was dressed in a man's faded blue shirt open at the throat for coolness and U. S. Army pants rolled up to the knees. Then she turned her head so that shoulder-length black hair partly obscured the soft curve of her cheek and he could not decide if she was trying to sound him out or if she was just making conversation.

"In that case, Miss," he said, "I won't put you out. Me and my old mule will swim across, even though she is mortally afraid of water."

The girl said quickly: "I'll take you."

Jack Bailey climbed down from the mule's back. He had trouble getting her to board the

scow, trouble that was complicated by the fact that the girl's presence prevened him from using language that the mule understood.

"Please, Cecelia," he begged the mule. "Git aboard!"

The girl's dark eyes smoldered on Jack for a moment while he struggled with the mule. Then she set her hands on hips and set to hollering.

"You wind-blown, botts-infested, loose-coupled, jackrabbit-eared son of a sheepheardin' bull moose, git aboard that ol' ferry or I'll whittle you up into bitty chunks and send them to the glue factory!"

The mule laid back its ears and hopped right onto the ferry. She stood in dead center with her legs braced and eyes rolling fearfully. The girl stuck out her chest and strode past Jack Bailey with uptilted chin. Jack glanced after her in admiration. When she had the ferry lines set he shoved the scow into the current. Slowly the ferry moved ahead, its pulleys squealing.

This, Jack thought, was what he had been looking for. Those ruts in the road had been made by wide tires of heavy wagons. This ferry was newly built for loads that would not ordinarily be found in this remote country. Undoubtedly this was the route of the rumored wagons that carried hijacked Government Spencer Repeating rifles through the lines to the Comanche raiders and renegades along the rim of the Llano Estacado and brought back guerilla loot from the frontier. This was a source of supply that Jack Bailey intended tapping for his starving men. Alone he intended finding the date of the next shipment. Then he would bring his company from the swamp to ambush it. The girl was hinting again.

"Now and then whole wagonloads of families come through here," she said. "They're all tryin' to get away from the war. They come both ways. I reckon they figure the war's where they are and that any place else is better."

"It usually is," Jack Bailey said.

The girl had to go back to her lines and a moment later the scow grated on the beach. The mule leaped clear to the shore to plunge up to the rim of the high bluff above. There she stood braying and shivering. The girl laughed.

"Well," she said. "If you're letting your old mule pick your road I reckon you'll never be crossing this river again."

"Looks that way," Jack admitted.

The girl's eyes shadowed. She dug into a pocket to produce a silver dollar, which she tossed to him.

"There's a town up behind the bluff," she said. "Morgan's Ferry, named after my old man. If he was here on Earth he'd buy you a drink. But this is the best I can do—and if I was you I'd spend it on eatin' food."

Jack's big hand closed on the hard coin.

"Thanks, Miss," he said softly.

WHERE there had been a little town on the bluff there was nothing now but blackened ruins and drifted ashes and trees that had been burned bare, ugly stumps with a few stubby branches. A couple of new buildings had been put up to the windward end of the ash heaps. Their walls were green lumber and their roofs made of canvas. One of these bore a sign that said simply, *Whisky*. The other had a smaller sign on which was lettered, *Hotel*. Jack stopped by the whisky shack because he heard voices from inside and there were horses at the rack. These animals were big and husky, carrying army saddles. It was obvious they had not been on a short grain diet.

Jack put his balky mule beside the horses and went into the shack. A crude bar had been set up at the rear. A couple of tables stood near the front, surrounded by whittled and spur-scarred three-legged stools. Three men leaning against the bar carried on an almost painfully innocent-sounding conversation.

"How's the fishin', Ben?"

"Ain't bin so good," Ben said. Ben was short and rather ferocious-looking with a black beard trimmed short like General Grant's. His eyes were black, too, with no more expression to them than the buttons on his dirty shirt. He turned ponderously like an ox to gaze at Jack. "Evenin,' Stranger,' Ben said. "Welcome to Morgan's Ferry. May your stay be a pleasant one. Have a drink on the house? Mike, a dipper of the best."

The man ran his sentences together with no periods and looked at Jack all the time he was talking. Jack nodded pleasantly. The saloonman went down to a keg that stood on a sawhorse and drew a tin cup of almost colorless liquid. Jack lifted the drink while the other men stood about to toast. The stuff burned like liquid pepper.

"Hope your fishin' luck will change, Ben," he said.

"Thanks, Stranger," said Ben.

Ben was asking for his name without putting the request into bald words. Like the girl at the ferry this man was trying to get Jack to talk. Jack wondered how they all fitted into the smuggling of rifles, and he finished his whisky and brought out the dollar the girl had given him.

"Set 'em up, Mike," he said. "Have one yourself if that dollar'll carry it. I'm right low on spending money."

Mike nodded, lifted down another mug from a row of nails behind the bar and drew a drink for himself. Ben did the honors. "I want you to meet my friends. This here is

Henry, and we call this specimin the Wall-Eye Perch, even if it does make him sore as a centepede in a burnin' log."

Jack shook with the men. Henry was like Ben, bloodless and mean. The one they called the Wall-Eye Perch he could not fathom. This gent lifted his watery blue gaze from his drink for only a moment then returned to contemplating the cup's contents.

"I'd like to drink this toast to the pretty little girl who runs the ferry," Jack suggested.

"To Donna," Ben agreed.

Donna Morgan, Jack thought, daughter of the man who had founded this town. So they drank to her, and after that the men left abruptly and Jack was alone with the barman. He could hear horses trotting toward the ferry. He wondered what Ben would say to Donna. Mike was absent-mindedly tapping the keg with his knuckles.

"You shouldn't of done that," he said. "They're touchy about her." Mike was broody. "You shouldn't of mentioned her." Then he got an especially hollow sound from the keg. "Better be makin' up a new batch. Those boys'll kill me if I run out."

"They looked harmless enough to me." Jack Bailey remarked.

Mike stared at him as if he had not seen him clearly before. "Maybe they don't look tough to you, Scar"—Mike named him—"but they're plenty tough enough for me. About that batch—" He was decidedly worried. "You didn't happen to pass any full corn cribs on the way through the Persimmon Hills?"

Jack remembered some pigs and a yard dog near a tumbledown house. He remembered other shanties that were mostly inhabited by women and kids, poor places with a hungry look about them. It had been a mighty poor country.

"I mind one crib," Jack said. It had been so full of corn he had even thought of going back for his men when he passed it. "It's about ten-twelve miles from here. Full up, too. There was an old gent on the gallery with a shotgun—and he wasn't waitin' for mice, either."

Mike brightened. "Never thought of him," he said. He picked up a jug from the floor and put it under the spigot. "Maybe you could use ten bucks, huh?" Mike suggested. "Ten bucks silver for only one evening's easy work?"

Mike was over eager, and Jack said, "Guess not, Mike. I been shot at enough for one war."

Mike pressed his argument. "I'll make it fifteen bucks and all you got to do is buy some corn from that old Jerry Longman."

"*Buy* it?" Jack said.

"That's right," Mike said. "You see, Scar, him and me ain't on speakin' terms. Him and me are the only ones left around here from the old days. Him and me and the Morgans. He's a red-hot rebel—but me—well, I gotta make a living and I don't see no point in stickin' my neck out."

"In that case," Jack said, "I'll take the job."

CHAPTER TWO

Shotgun Warning

JACK BAILEY was playing in luck. He had not expected to find so good an excuse for hanging around Morgan's Ferry. This one was perfect. They drank again to seal their bargain and Mike turned over the *Whisky* sign to expose its backside on which was lettered, *Closed.*

"That means they got to wait on themselves," Mike explained.

They picketed the mule where grazing was fairly good and hitched two horses to a battered buckboard whose paint was blistered and peeling.

"When the raiders burned down this town I hardly got it out of the barn," Mike told Jack. "And Lazy Ed Morgan's own home town, too, and—" Mike took a deep breath. "Trouble with me is I talk too damn much," he said and hurried off into the hotel tent. A moment later he appeared with some gunny sacks which he tossed into the rear of the buckboard with the jug. Then he and Jack drove through the ashes of the burned town toward the landing. Mike was more gloomy than ever. His eyes could not hold on Jack Bailey.

"I ain't sayin' anything against Lazy Ed, *sabe,* nothing at all. I don't know nothin' about him except he likes my whisky. It's only that it don't seem reasonable to burn down a town named after your old man and then make your kid sister run the ferry. See?"

"She looks like she could handle it," Jack Bailey said noncommittally.

Mike was sweating. At the landing Jack stepped down to help hold the ferry snug to the bank while Mike drove the buckboard onto the deck. Donna Morgan had a quick and worried smile for Jack.

"Change your mind?" she asked.

Jack lifted the landing stage and shoved off. He helped the girl haul on a line. Her closeness had a curiously quickening effect on Jack's pulse. He had to remind himself that this was war—and that this girl was his enemy.

"Got a job," he said shortly. "Workin' for Mike. And I need the money."

Skillfully Donna Morgan bent the lines down around belaying pins. She took a long boathook up to the bow of the ferry to ward off any debris that happened to drift in the way. Jack followed, making a pretence it was

to hold the reins of the team. The girl did not face him when she spoke to him again.

"You're a damned fool," she said in a whisper. "And you'll be a dead damn fool if you don't get aboard your old mule and ride away from here while there's still time."

Jack Bailey felt himself turn strangely cold. The girl had spoken so low her voice mingled with the slap of waves against the scow's bottom, the restless movements of the horses and the creak of gear. Mike could not have heard her at all.

Jack said rather loudly: "Then I figgered on gettin' in a couple days of fishin' before I go on."

"You'll catch a gravestone," Donna said grimly.

Then she moved back to work the ropes as the scow drew close to shore. Jack Bailey did not get another chance to talk to her. . . .

It seemed impossible that they should know who he was or why he was here, Jack thought as the buckboard rattled on over a deeply-rutted road into the Persimmon Hills. It seemed improbable that they even could have guessed close to the answer; and he was certain that he had not been betrayed by his own men.

"It'll be dark before we get there," Mike was saying. "I'll sorta git out before old Jerry Longman sees me, *sabe?* You'll go up and offer to share the jug. Tell him you're a lousy rebel like Donna Morgan. When he's good and drunk I'll sneak into the corncrib and fill the sacks. Nothin' to it."

"I thought you said I was to buy the corn," Jack said.

"Same as buyin'," Mike said, unabashed. "Nobody has any money, anyway, hardly. So we'll trade for the corn. A jug of whisky for a couple bushels. Why, my gosh, Scar, Jerry's gettin' a bargain. I'm bein' too generous."

"You sure as hell are," Jack said.

Now they had reached timber country, oaks and persimmon on the slopes, the white arms of sycamore dominating the water courses. There were places where scrub-covered fields that had not been cultivated for three years; and then with the coming of darkness they passed a wide field that had been burned over.

"Was enough corn there for more bar'ls whisky than I could cook last fall," Mike grumbled. "But they had to burn it just because the old lady on the place called Lazy Ed a skunk."

"What happened to the old lady?" Jack asked.

"She died," Mike said evasively. "Old age, reckon. Anyway, nobody knows who did burn up the field or her shanty while she was in it. Anyway, she was dead already, folks say. Maybe she set fire to the place before she died."

HE WHIPPED the team to wheel down the rutty road into the woods. After a while he pulled in on the reins. It was fairly dark down here in the valley where it would soon be night. Mike handed the reins over to Jack and stepped down. He gathered up his bundle of gunny sacks.

"Tell this old goat you beat me up and stole the team and jug," Mike said. "That'll make him like you. Give me a couple of hours to get the stuff and tote it down the road. Then come pick me up."

"Sure enough," Jack said. He flicked the reins, letting the horses take the wide curve in the road at an easy pace. The open field that surrounded Jerry Longman's shanty was less dark than the woods had been. But no lights showed in the darkness when Jack hauled in the team. Instantly old Longman's voice cut across the yard.

"That's Mike's rig, damn it," he said. "And even if you ain't Mike, you ain't welcome. Git!"

"It *was* Mike's rig," Jack called out. "I stole it off him. Also all the whisky he had in his barrel."

Jerry Longman laughed harshly. "That's the best one yet," he jeered. "He's been tryin' to get at my corn crib for the past month, the skunk!"

Harness made its faint creaking sounds and the buckboard sagged under the shift of Jack's weight. Jack wondered if Mike really needed that corn or if he was using this meeting as a sort of test to find out where Jack's sympathies lay. He wondered, too, if Mike had named Donna Morgan a rebel just to draw him out. It seemed quite improbable that she would operate this ferry and yet be against her brother. But Jack Bailey knew he could never find the answers or capture the wagon train by backing out now.

He took out the weight tied to the picket line to hold the team and walked around to the rear for the jug. He held the jug in front of himself on a level with his stomach as he crossed the dark dooryard toward the rickety gallery where the old man sat.

"You got your nerve, anyway," old Jerry Longman said with a wheezing expiration of breath. "You got more nerve than any of the rest of that mangey outfit."

"Thanks," Jack Bailey said. "And you got yours, Mister Longman."

"Meanin'?"

Jack Bailey could see the shotgun now, bright with much handling. The old man was just a shadow to him, with eyes.

"Miss Donna was sayin' you're the only one who never let Lazy Ed break him down," Jack said.

"You're lyin'," Jerry Longman said, "and I'm a feller who uses that word only when I'm

justified. She never told you anything of the kind. Git—and git quick."

The muzzle of the shotgun moved up to a point at Jack's chest—and Jack froze.

Mike's story was getting Jack nowhere. Truth might. Jack changed his tactics.

"I am lying," he admitted. "I brought a jug along so we could get you drunk and steal your corn. Only it would seem to me it would be easier to shoot you."

"Would be," the old man agreed, "'ceptin' some folks are handier alive than dead. Just take a snort of that likker, bub, and be sure you swallow it. If it don't kill you I'll accept your present with thanks. But you don't git no corn."

Jack cuffed the cork loose. He gulped loudly and coughed a little and made a wry face. He was so desperately hungry the liquor burned him dully. He set the cork back into the jug and beat it down hard with the heel of his hand. Then he shoved the jug across the boards to old Longman's feet.

"Think nothin' of it, Mister," Jack said. "We'll get the corn, anyway. G'night."

He wheeled away to stride toward the wagon and noticed that the horses were standing with their heads cocked. Something moved in the brush beyond the horses. Jack threw himself flat on the ground, and almost at the same instant a rifle roared so loudly his ears hummed. The sound of the bullet smacking into the thin wall of the old-timer's shanty blended with the bark of the rifle. Then Jerry Longman's shotgun bellowed its answer, the buckshot whistling past the team and snipping into the woods. The horses ran away with the buckboard, dragging their anchor awkwardly. For a long while Jack could hear them crashing around.

CHAPTER THREE

Likker—and Hot Lead!

JACK BAILEY did not dare move. He listened for small sounds that might help build a picture of what had happened or give him a preview of what was coming next. Apparently Jerry Longman had not left the gallery where he had been sitting behind the jug. Now and then a tiny creaking of the porch floor betrayed his presence there. Nor had the man in the bushes left after that first exchange of shot.

Then, very faintly, a rustling sound could be heard from the direction of the cornerib. It was too big and steady a sound for a mouse, the kind of sound a man will make tucking dry corn into a gunny sack. Then there was silence except for the usual night noises and the thumping of Jack's heart against the hard ground.

When Mike came back for two more sacks of corn Jack decided the time had come for him to try a get-away. Mike, made bold by the quiet, was noiser than he had been. This could help silence any accidental noise that Jack might make, or distract attention from him at least, so he started to wriggle slowly ahead, pulling himself along by his elbows. He had moved less than a foot when the shotgun roared over him and a fistful of slugs whistled by. There was a wild yelp in the woods and the sharp bark of the rifle. The bullet skittered up a tree trunk into the sky and Jack got his feet under him to charge.

He definitely did not like the idea of being in the middle of a battlefield. But he could not run down the road, so he dove into the brush. The shotgun shattered the night again; the rifle opened up and hounds began to howl up and down the valley. Night birds squawked. Leaves sifted down over Jack Bailey like little green butterflies, and he began to place the hard, controlled breathing of a terrified man. The stink of burned powder was all about him now.

The bushwhacker was not far away. Jack could feel the presence of him there in the brush; then he saw him, leaning against the bole of an oak tree, his rifle barrel slanted downward toward the ground, his eyes staring into the night. He was a tall, lean man, breathing jerkily through his mouth. He was about ten feet beyond the road and he was looking for Jack.

At the shanty old Jerry Longman set up a holler. "If you ain't dead," he was shouting, "come out of there in a hurry or I'll give you another load of buck!"

The bushwhacker crouched lower, his boots crunching in the forest floor as weight moved to the balls of his feet. Jack had to guess the man's position, but he knew that if this bushwhacker was hunkered down his natural tendency would be to lift the muzzle of his rifle, and when the old-timer followed up his threat by triggering the shotgun again, Jack finished his charge. He went in while the noise was loud about them, coming up under the rifle barrel that was in the position he had figured it would be. He got his shoulder under the steel and flung his arms around the astonished man. This threw them both over against the oak.

The ambusher tried to smash Jack with the rifle, but Jack had anticipated him and had kept his pressure up against the gun. Jack drove a knee into the man's face, bashing his head back against the tree. The man dropped his rifle to grapple with Jack and Jack fell against him.

For a while they threshed around blindly in the brush. One moment Jack was on top, then his enemy. Then the bushwhacker dragged a

bowie knife from a sheath in his boot. Jack rolled away from the knife and at the same time kicked straight up with the heels of his boots. He caught the bushwhacker in the neck and smashed him back into the brush.

After that Jack's enemy did not move and Jack lay there breathing heavily. The knife was stuck into the earth only inches from his face.

At the shack old Jerry Longman was bellowing again. "By God, you come out or I'll come after you."

Jack said: "Go to hell." He got to his knees and pulled the knife from the ground. He fumbled around for the rifle. Then, laboriously, he fought his way through the brush to the road.

"Go ahead and shoot," he shouted to the old man.

"The devil with that," Jerry answered. "You drove that dang cork in so stout I can't pull it out. Come up here and give me a hand. I'll shoot later."

Jack tossed the bowie knife up onto the gallery.

"Whittle it out with this," he said, and stumbled on down the road in the direction the horses had taken.

JACK BAILEY found the team all tangled up about half a mile from Longman's. The horses might have kicked themselves to death trying to get loose, but they were well-trained and after their initial fright had apparently waited for someone to come by and untangle them. Jack did this, straightening the reins and getting everything in order. Then he had to face the proposition of passing old Jerry Longman's shanty again if he was to get back to the ferry. He did not like that idea because he still was not sure who was shooting at whom, or what had happened to the man with whom he had battled.

That hombre he had identified as the one they called the Wall-Eye Perch. Then a sudden excitement hit Jack as his fingers moved over the rifle he had captured. It was a Spencer Repeater .52 calibre, the kind of gun that he was trying to trail. Just holding it in his hand made him shiver as if he had the breakbone fever. He checked it for load and found it still held four cartridges, and he became angry with himself for not having taken the time to relieve his enemy of ammunition for the gun.

He laid the rifle across the back of the seat and got into the buckboard. Immediately the horses started to trot toward home. When they sniffed the gunsmoke that still hovered around Longman's shanty they showed signs of terror again, but answered to the reins. In the starlight Jack could not see anyone near the corncrib, nor sign of the old-timer on the gallery, so he drove on, hunched in the seat, letting the spooked horses make their own pace. He swept into the long curve beyond which he had left Mike with the gunny sacks and shortly thereafter spotted the barman waving him to halt. Mike was as excited as a boy.

"Got eight sacks while you fellers were fightin'," he said. "The old boy'll be astonished tomorrow. Or did you kill him?"

"Deader'n a haddock," Jack said.

Mike was heaving the corn into the back of the buckboard. He lashed it down and climbed up beside Jack. His rump rubbed against the rifle. He almost jumped over the dashboard.

"You didn't need to kill him," Mike said. "Jerry was a decent old coot, even if he was a damned rebel."

"I didn't kill him," Jack said. "I killed your friend, the feller you sent ahead to bushwhack me."

Mike began to talk very fast. "I never sent anybody out there! I don't know nothing about it. Whoever it was—"

"You're talking to a man who don't have ears," Jack Bailey told him.

The girl was waiting for them at the ferry and they crossed and went up to Mike's saloon. Mike dumped the corn into a great wooden tub, added yeast and warm river water; but Jack Bailey did not stay with him. Jack went down to the landing and sat on the end of the ferry rolling a cigarette. He offered it to the girl who sat beside him, and when she refused he lighted up. He kept the glowing end of the butt shielded with the palm of his hand. It was getting on toward midnight, Jack reckoned.

"Why do they want to kill me?" Jack asked finally.

He felt the slight movement of the girl as she turned her body toward him. Carried on the clean night air, the scent of her mingled with the aroma of his smoke. It was a nice combination.

"They just don't want anybody around," she said. "But as soon as they find out who you are they'll make damn sure to kill you."

"I'm not anybody," Jack said. "Just Jack Bailey—fed up on fighting."

"Old clothes—a mule—farmer's shoes—no money—hinted you were a deserter," the girl said. "You try too hard."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Jack.

She said, with a lift of anger in her voice: "You don't fit the rig. You're not the kind of man who'd ride a mule. You couldn't even cuss it out in the presence of a lady. If you were in any army you'd be an officer. You would never desert."

Her voice had become husky and he found himself staring straight at her, looking into her enormous dark eyes. Her mouth was full

with a softness to it—and this was a place of magic. She had ticked him off precisely—but it had been a long time since he had been with a woman by a river in the summer.

"Wall-Eye tried to bushwhack me out at Longman's," Jack said slowly, trying to keep his mind off the girl. "He knew I was going there. Why'd they wait until I went out there?"

"They're always watching him," she said with apparent candor. "He's on our side. They suspect everyone who visits him of Southern sympathies."

There it was again; the girl this time claiming to be a rebel; and suddenly she came across to him, grabbing him by the shoulders, shaking him a little. "You can't lick them," she cried. "They'll try for you again—and the second time they won't miss. Take your old Cecelia mule, Mister—" She hesitated. "Jack Bailey—" she caressed the name.

Her hands were firm on his arms and his cigarette was burning his fingers. He dropped it into the water. It hit with a gentle hissing sound, and then he could not hold himself back any longer. His arms went around her supple back and he pressed her up against him. Her mouth fell open to reveal a white little crescent, and when he leaned down to kiss her she did not fight him off. Her lips were firmly soft against his.

They froze. Then Jack lifted his head and looked into her eyes.

"You've got me wrong," he said. "I'm just a feller who's had enough of war. I fought because I had to, not because I wanted to."

She moved away and jumped to her feet and smoothed down the front of her blouse. "Anyway, thanks for the kiss," she said. "It's a long time since I've been kissed. It's nice."

Jack kept well away from Donna Morgan. He could not trust himself with her now. She turned her head away from him, making him feel as alone there as he might have been in the middle of an ocean. Then she faced him again, abruptly, turning to him with a little whirling motion that flung her dark hair about her cheek.

"Just think of my brother as an enemy," she said, "not as a traitor. He thinks what he is doing is right."

"That may be," Jack conceded, "for all I know. And when you see him, Miss Donna, just tell him you couldn't pump a thing out of me."

She glared at him for a moment with stark hatred in her eyes. He thought she was going to slap him, but she wheeled away and stared across the river.

CHAPTER FOUR

Laying the Ambush

JACK BAILEY collected his fifteen dollars from Mike the next morning and asked if he might borrow some fish line. Mike fetched the line and even offered to add a jug of his potable as a sort of bonus.

"And you can keep the line," Mike said eagerly. "I hear the French are tryin' to set up a king down in Mexico and are paying good money for fighters. There's a big gold strike in Idaho, too."

"But I'm not going anywhere," Jack said.

"There ain't nothin' but trouble around here," Mike persisted.

"Maybe there ain't," Jack shrugged lazily. "But it looks like the fishing might be pretty good, and I'm tired of ridin' all the time. I aim to take it easy for a couple of days."

Mike went back to stirring the stuff in his big tub. Jack refused the offered jug, threw a blanket over his mule's bony back and drifted south. For a few miles he followed the deep ruts made by the heavy wagons, then pulled off the road to cut behind a rolling rise in the prairie and turn back on his trail. As he figured it, a hard ride would take him far enough down the Hatchet to make contact with his men, who had been following him on the scout for the wagon train. In the ordinary course of events it would take about three days for them to reach the ferry and set an ambush. He had no way of knowing when the wagons would come through, but now that he had found their route he had a feeling of urgency about it all. Still, he was a cautious man, so he hid the mule and went on foot back to the road to see if he was being followed.

There was a smell of dust in the air along the road, and here the print of a shoed horse partly obliterated the narrower mark made by Jack's Cecelia mule. Jack had expected something like this since he knew he was being watched constantly, so he edged off the road again into the brush and waited. This was pure hell, this waiting; each minute made it less possible for Jack to reach his men and yet return to the ferry that evening so no one would suspect him. Then the mule brayed and Jack was so startled he nearly tripped the trigger of the rifle he had acquired last night.

The mule smelled Jack in the brush and came over to nose at him. Something had upset the delicate balance of her nerves so she wanted to be closer to the only thing she knew in this alien country. Jack tried to shoo her off without giving away his position to the

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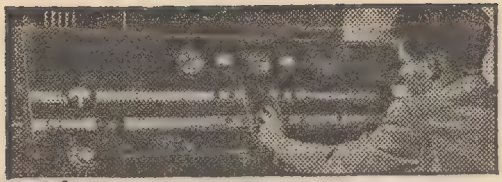

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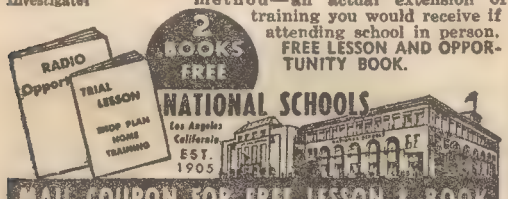

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horseman, and the mule thought he was playing. She put her ears back, bared her teeth, and made a feint for him.

Jack slapped her on the side of the neck hoping it would drive her away. She jumped —and a rifle barked. The mule's eyes bugged. Jack had to back away quickly to get out from under her. She had been killed instantly with a bullet that had undoubtedly been intended for Jack Bailey. Brush crashed under the weight of the falling mule. Twigs danced crazily and a flurry of dry leaves whirled a couple of feet into the air. Jack laid down on his stomach and continued his vigil.

He knew just about where the bushwhacker was located, but did not go after him. He knew that the bushwhacker had also seen him that instant before the rifle shot, so he tried to outpatience him.

When a covy of quail suddenly flushed out of the brush Jack had his man spotted. Jack started to curse aloud. He made a threshing sound in his hideout. He stood up, brushed himself off, counted three and fell flat to the ground again. A bullet hummed through the air he had so recently displaced but Jack's man was pinpointed. Jack put three bullets into the smoke haze, spacing them about one foot apart. He heard a sharp, bitter scream.

Jack moved ahead then, cautiously, until he found Ben's friend Henry in the brush. Henry was dead, the top of his head smashed in; Henry would never tell, now, the things he might have told if he had only been wounded. But Jack had learned what he had wanted to know. The next wagon train was coming through mighty soon. He would not have time to bring up his boys. He must move alone.

He left Henry there after relieving him of the rifle, all his ammunition and a cap-and-ball Colt's revolver. He found Henry's horse. Smiling thinly he climbed into the saddle and reined the balky mount toward the river. There Jack Bailey went fishing, just as he had told Mike he intended doing. He caught the biggest big-mouth bass he had ever seen. It must have weighed a good ten pounds.

JACK BAILEY came back to the burned village of Morgan's Ferry with the red sun on his back. He knew he was still being watched, so he avoided any evasive action that might give him away. He hunched low in the saddle to make his silhouette appear to be no taller than Henry's. He took the chance that anyone watching him would identify him by the horse, a fair chance, since a horse is easier to recognize at a distance.

Throwing reins over the rack where only one other horse stood Jack stepped down into the dust. Though Jack was a man of courage

he had often known a brief second of panic before a battle. When he could see what was coming, he was cool. But when he was forced blindly to walk into a possible trap, his heart acted up foolishly and his ears buzzed.

But there was no turning back, no hesitating now. With the rifle under his arm and the fish in his left hand, Jack pushed open the slat door of the whisky shack. Instantly he saw two things. Ben's broad back was toward him —and Mike was white as the foam on the top of his yeasty brew.

"H'war'ya, Henry," Mike mumbled. Mike's face was excited. "Steal the guy's fish too, huh?"

That was as far as he got. Jack Bailey was just inside the door. Mike was behind the bar —and Ben wheeled like a longhorn steer fighting a lobo wolf. The pistol he had held hidden against his chest barked spitefully. He had not even stopped to aim, so he had missed, ripping a long gash in the canvas roof of Mike's saloon. Jack fired back at him, also missing, cutting a hole in the rough board floor. Ben put his second shot through the slack of Jack's shirt. Then Jack, who had been unable to lever the rifle with one hand, threw the big-mouthed bass at Ben. While Ben was off balance Mike hit him in the back of the head with a jug.

Ben slumped against the bar, nearly upsetting it while chunks of jug rained on the floor. Mike stared stupidly at the jug's handle, which he still held gripped in his hand. Jack began to laugh.

He picked up the fish and set it on the bar in front of Mike.

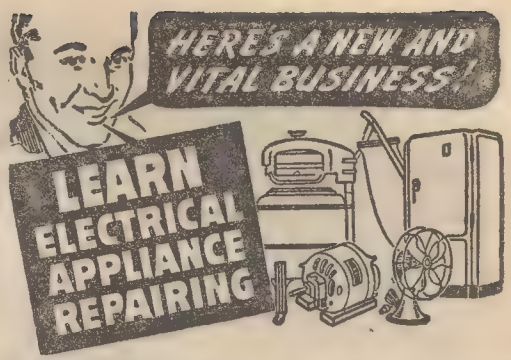
"How about cookin' this for supper?" he suggested. "Make a little wine sauce for it, huh? *A la Antoine*, with white grapes."

Mike had nearly fainted. He said in a hoarse whisper: "I thought you was a ghost, Scar. By God, you got to believe me! I didn't have nothing to do with that ambush last night. These boys was just waiting for you to drop in on Jerry Longman. Honest to God, Scar. They think you're a rebel, scouting their—" He stopped abruptly, looking astonished that he had said as much as he had.

"Forget it," Jack said. The saloonman was jumpy. Jack took a flyer. "When are they running the next wagon train across the river, Mike?" he asked.

Mike's florid face whitened again. He gaped at the broken bits of the jug. "I don't know nothing about wagon trains," he said.

Jack said: "Last night I killed Wall-Eye, and you didn't know anything about him. This afternoon Henry tried to ambush me, and this evening Ben was bellied up to the bar with a pistol ready for me. You didn't know anything about any of it."



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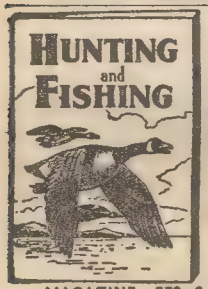

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Mike licked dry lips. Hoarsely he said: "They're coming through tonight."

"That's better," Jack said. Mike seemed relieved, though frightened at the fact that he had talked. Jack added casually: "You and I are going to capture those wagons, Mike."

Mike drew a tin cup of his white mule and gulped it. "Not me," he exploded.

"Yes, you," Jack Bailey said.

Jack picked up Ben's pistol and started to load it.

"I'll cook the fish first," Mike said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Rides the Scow

THEY waited in Mike's saloon. Mike was draining his keg for Dutch courage. Ben was sitting sullenly on a three-legged stool to which both his hands and feet were bound. They had been giving him all the whisky he wanted and he was pretty drunk. He finally broke down and talked.

"Damn you," he said. "I hope they gut-shoot you and I get a chance to rub sand in the wound." He gulped hastily at a cup of Mike's horrible liquor. "Put two white lanterns on the top of the bluff ten yards apart where old Morgan's shack used to be. There'll be four wagons. Ed always comes over with the last one." He scowled down at the table. "There'll be a guard and driver on each wagon, but no outriders. The guards will be dressed like women, to make it look like they were emigrants. But don't let that fool you." He glanced up at Mike. "Give me another drink."

But Mike had run out of liquor. He upended the barrel, but got nothing.

Mike fetched lanterns, which he set up at the designated spot. When he came back to the tent, Donna Morgan was with him. Donna was pale through her rich tan. She ran across the narrow floor to Jack Bailey, who was finishing the bass which Mike had fried in bacon drippings. When he grinned at her she stopped suddenly, embarrassed.

"Mighty fine fishin' in the Hatchet," Jack said. "Tomorrow I'll catch me a big one."

"You're signaling them across," the girl accused him.

"Sure," Jack said. "There's two ways of fighting a war, Donna. One way is to get yourself a great big army and a lot of guns and slug it out. The other way is to cut up the other feller's army into little chunks small enough to lick. That's my way."

He gestured with a hand to Ben tied to the stool.

Donna said, "But—"

Jack held up his hand and counted off his fingers. "Well-Eye—Henry—Ben—even Mike—"

Mike said vehemently: "Now listen, Scar, we're allies."

It eased the girl's fears somewhat, but her big eyes were still troubled. She said: "Give Ed a break, will you, Jack? He isn't in this for the money. He thinks he's being true to his country, Jack. Honest he does."

Jack thought of the frontier ranches that had been wiped out with the help of rifles that Lazy Ed Morgan had run across the ferry. He thought of the women who had died in agony while their flimsy shanties burned down over them, of smothered babies and children, little boys and girls taken into slavery. He thought of his own men, too, starving in the Arkansas swamps, and what they could do with the guns and supplies in Lazy Ed's wagon train. He clenched his teeth for a moment. Then he said, "I'll give him a break, Donna."

She said huskily: "I'll be praying for you, Jack," and she stepped over the hole Jack's rifle had blasted in the floor and left.

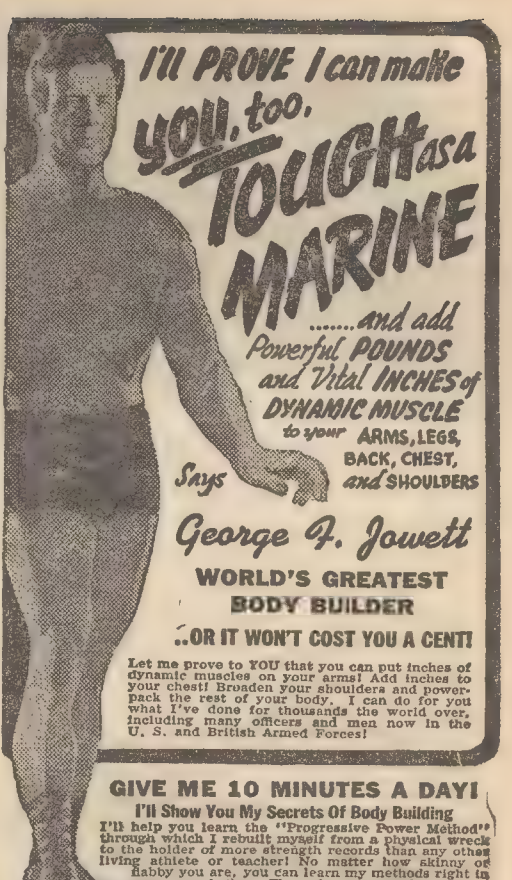
JACK BAILEY checked the loads of the pistols he had taken from Ben and Henry. He gave one of these to Mike. There were only two shots left in the Spencer, for which he had been unable to locate any more cartridges. Then the seemingly endless wait was on again.

As Ben sobered up he became mean and silent. Mike built up some brave by boasting. Jack went to the bluff to watch the ferry. It was nearly midnight when the first wagon rumbled down the long slope of the northern bank, a big Conestoga drawn by six horses. Its canvas top had been dyed a dull brown to make it less conspicuous.

With the wagon braked on the slope teamsters unhitched the horses, then ran stringers from the scow to the front wheels of the Conestoga and let the great wagon coast slowly onto the ferry deck. With the ferry on its way, the unwilling horses were driven into the stream where they were forced to swim across behind the scow. Then on the near side of the river they were hitched up again and put on the hard pull up the south bank. The ferry recrossed the river for the second wagon which was waiting there. Jack went around the "Hotel" to Mike's saloon.

"They're coming," he reported.

They moved Ben over to one of the tables where it would not be too obvious that he was lashed down to the stool. It was as if he was sitting there with his hands on his knees. They set a mug before him, along with the dirty dishes from Jack's meal. Jack sat down beside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him and Mike got behind the bar. Mike wiped off his forehead with the back of his hand. They could hear the rumble of the big wagon approaching the tent-shacks and the steady cursing of the driver. Jack grinned at Ben.

"If you're a very good boy," he promised, "we'll let you go when the party is over."

Ben spat on the floor. A moment later the first of the teamsters came in, grinning.

"Evenin', Mike," he shouted. "Evenin', boys. Ben—" He blinked in the bright light, hardly even glancing at Ben and Jack sitting at the table. "My tongue's in my boots, Mike. Git goin' on that rotgut. And while you're at it, draw one for my *wife*."

That was the moment that Jack had feared, the moment when Mike would break down or come through, the moment when Ben might ruin everything. Jack knew that Ben was going to say something. But what?

"Set 'em up on the house, Mike," Ben's voice croaked. Ben's dark eyes shifted nervously to Jack. Ben's lips were almost white.

"Why, sure," Mike said. "How's the trip, Lippy?

The teamster started to talk. Mike set a tin cup on the bar and held the muzzle of a cocked pistol behind it. Lippy shut up quickly.

"Keep on talkin'," Mike said, "just like nothin' happened."

"Mutiny," Lippy whispered. Mike moved the thumb that was holding back the hammer of the cocked Colt. Lippy began to talk fast and loud. "Easiest trip we ever had," he said. "Come down slicker'n a whistle—"

He was still talking when his pardner came in, a young looking man who stopped just inside the doorway to unhook a wide-skirted dress and pull it over his head. The "wife" was cursing through the material, damning the fact that he had to doll himself up like this, and when he was a man again, standing in his pants and shirt, he looked straight into the muzzle of Jack's pistol.

THE second Conestoga rumbled up from the river—and the third—and it was all very smooth for Jack Bailey. They tied up the teamsters with everything available, from ropes to torn-up dresses. One of the men put up a fight so Jack had to knock him cold with a pistol barrel. And after the third wagon had been handled, Jack began to feel like a handful of percussion caps on which a rock was about to fall. He had learned that there were four men with the last wagon—Lazy Ed Morgan's—and since this deadfall would not work with that many men, Jack made up his mind to a more desperate plan. Three wagonloads of guns and ammunition were better than none. He would take a chance on losing the last, in

order to get away with these. He'd play safe.

Jack got an axe from Mike, picked up his rifle, and left the whisky tent. His plan was to wait until the ferry drew close to the shore. Then he was going to cut the cable and let the scow drift downstream. He would follow it as far as possible, trying to pick off the teamsters with the rifle. He did not dare think of what might happen to Donna.

But Donna had not left the south bank. She was there with the ferry while the fourth wagon waited on the north side of the river.

"What's up?" Jack asked hoarsely.

"I had to see you again," the girl said tensely. "That's all."

He did not know how it happened, but she was hugging him, axe, rifle and all. She was shuddering violently as she clung to him.

She said: "I can go now. Give her a shove, Jack." Jack started to pry the scow off. The girl was at her lines, but her face was toward Jack and it seemed to be so white it was phosphorescent. "Goodbye," she said.

Jack grabbed the rifle and axe and threw them onto the scow's deck and jumped after them. The girl rushed up to him, trying to push him off, but Jack got a grip on her arms and lifted her from the deck.

"You were going to wreck the ferry," he began, "so your brother and I—"

She cleared her throat and cut in: "You were going to do the same."

Then he set her down again and for a moment they were warm in each other's arms.

CHAPTER SIX

The Last Fight

LAZY ED MORGAN was swearing at Donna in a low, deliberate voice. "The time it took you to come back I could of growed a beard," he said bitterly.

She said: "One of the lines was fouled up."

Jack Bailey was lying flat on the far end of the scow against the landing stage. He was

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on top of the rifle, his face buried in his arms.

The last great wagon rumbled slowly down the stringers onto the scow. Jack could feel the movement of heavy wheels over the rough planks and the settling of the craft under the weight. Brakes screamed and one of the men swore lengthily. To Jack Bailey that one sounded like Jerry Longman, but Jack could not be sure and it seemed improbable that the old-timer would be on that wagon.

The soft patter of feet came down the deck. Donna's toe prodded Jack's ribs and he came up swiftly to a low crouch to duck down under the running gear of the Conestoga.

The scow began to move as Donna eased up on the after lines to give the ferry the proper upstream slant. A moment later her brother joined her.

"Looks like you lost your war, kid," he was roweling her. "It's damn near over. Grant took Vicksburg on the fourth of July, and Banks took Port Hudson on the ninth. The Confederacy's cut in half. And on the third of July up in Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, Lee's army was licked—beaten to shreds."

The girl's body had a strange curve to it as if she had been beaten, too, and could not raise her head; and under the wagon Jack Bailey knew that the war was truly lost if Lazy Ed Morgan was telling the truth. With Port Hudson and Vicksburg gone, the Mississippi would be impassible. His cut-off company would never be able to rejoin the army.

But Jack Bailey's war had not yet ended, nor had Donna's. One step from where Jack waited stood Lazy Ed Morgan. The two teamsters were in the after part of the boat, working on the swimming horses. The fourth member seemed to have vanished. They were in mid-stream now and Jack took the one pace that brought him up to Lazy Ed's side.

"You can jump overboard," Jack said quietly, "and we'll call it quits."

The girl clung to the line she had twisted down over the belaying pins. Jack could not see her there behind her heavy-set brother.

Lazy Ed asked in his soft, easy drawl: "Who are you?"

"Jack Bailey, Captain, Army of the Confederated States of America."

Lazy Ed Morgan began a low, soft laugh. "But the war's over, man," he said.

"The war's not over until the peace is signed," Jack said. "And we can use those rifles, Mister."

Lazy Ed's hand moved swiftly and Jack saw the gleam of a Derringer the heavy man had kept hidden in the palm of his right hand. Jack tried to side-step, so he could close in on Lazy Ed and would not have to kill him there in

front of his sister. But the Derringer barked and Jack did not quite get out of its way. The heavy slug hit Jack above the elbow to smash him back against one of the seven-foot wheels of the Conestoga.

Lazy Ed Morgan saw that Jack could not arm his rifle so he stepped up toward him.

"So I can jump overboard, huh, Johnny Reb?" he taunted. Deliberately and viciously, he kicked Jack where his left arm was broken. "Maybe you're the one who ought to take the swim."

Then Donna made her attack. She slashed at Lazy Ed's back with a rope-end. His Derringer bullet chunked off a wagon tire, and Ed turned in fury on his sister. He slapped her so hard in the face she was slammed up against the rail and nearly went over its side. Jack staggered after him, swinging his rifle like a club. His blow was so puny it could not have hurt Lazy Ed, but it did distract him just as he was about to kick at Donna. He charged Jack. In doing so he tripped over the rope on the deck and tumbled overboard.

And the only thing that Jack could think of at the moment was that it was better to have Lazy Ed meet his end this way—better than if he or Donna had been forced to kill him.

He staggered to the rail to brace himself.

"It's over, Jack," Donna said to him, very gently. "You gave my brother his break, Jack. I'll always remember—"

Jack said vaguely: "These teamsters—"

"Jerry Longman's got them," she said. "Ed thought he was a harmless old man and handy bait to have around. So he brought him along and the boys are sitting there looking into Jerry's shotgun right now. So take it easy."

Jack sighed and relaxed.

"I gotta get this ferry going if we're going to deliver these supplies," the girl said.

Then she was gone, and Jack braced himself against the rail, waiting happily until she could return.

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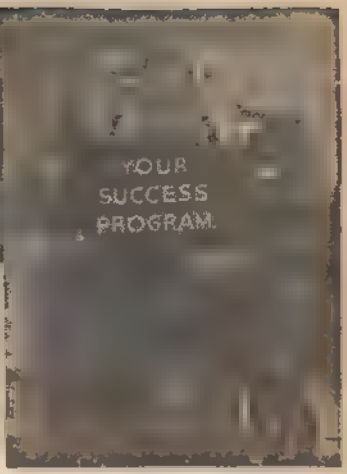

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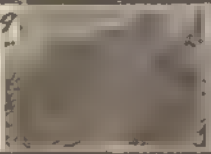

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Learn at home in your spare time. Prepare for a fine profession. Many men and women now making big money. You can own will be you learn. Practical Course in HOROLOGY. Thorough training and complete watch and clock repair tools. Also training for Jewelry Work and other scientific precision trades. Easy terms. Mail coupon for FREE booklet.

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PRACTICAL UP-TO-DATE COURSE

How to pick locks, make keys, repair locks, etc. Now, a complete course covering every phase of the work. Easy to learn. Practical for the mechanic, carpenter, garage owner, factory man, etc. Low cost. Easy terms.

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SELF-INSTRUCTION COURSE teaches you in practical way how to make all kinds of operations, trouble-shooting. No previous knowledge necessary. Learn quickly in spare time. Many earn while learning. Write for booklet. Tells how to get started in Radio, how you can be trained at home in your spare time for a good job in Radio. Many new opportunities now and after the war. Mail coupon today for free booklet. No obligation.

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MECHANICAL DRAWING, DESIGNING, BLUEPRINT READING Inventions come for the wide-awake person who knows how to get 'em, develop 'em, sell 'em and promote them! Easy, practical way to learn. Spare time. Low cost. Easy terms. Write for booklet. Tells how you can be trained at home in your spare time for a good job in Radio. Many new opportunities now and after the war. Mail coupon today for free booklet. No obligation.

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Please send me—Free, without obligation—Illustrated Success-Catalog containing information about the subject(s) I have checked below. No salesman will call.

- ☐ Watch & Clock Repairing
- ☐ Locksmithing
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Practical Radio Servicing
- ☐ Real Estate
- ☐ Auto Mechanics
- ☐ Mail Order Business
- ☐ Carpentry
- ☐ Invention

NAME_____

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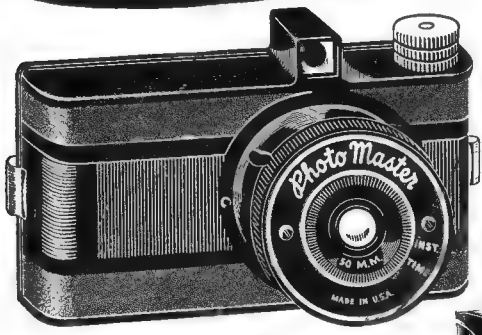
CITY_____ ZONE_____ STATE_____

Calling All Camera Fans!

Genuine Photo Master CANDID CAMERA



The Ideal Gift For Mother, Dad, Sis or Brother

$3.98 POST PAID

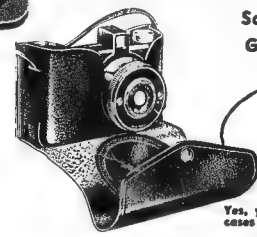
TAKE PICTURES YOU WILL TREASURE!

Imagine getting a genuine Photo Master with a *ground* and *pitch polished lens* in the face of one of the most drastic camera shortages in our history! A camera designed to take pictures in *full color* as well as black and white! A camera that will enable you to graphically record the events and people of the present for you to enjoy in the future. Yes, start today to take pictures of things as they happen. It's a real thrill that will bring you reflected pleasures for years to come. So order your Photo Master *now!* And if after the postman delivers it you don't think the $3.98 you paid for it is the best $3.98 you've ever spent—return it within 10 days and we'll refund your money cheerfully—and *quick as a flash!*

Sold on a "Examine At Our Risk" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Look At These Features

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Extremely Simple, Foolproof Operation
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Also Takes Excellent Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Level View Finder



This Made-To-Measure **CARRYING CASE** only **2c** with purchase of Camera

Yes, you can have one of these made-to-measure carrying cases worth 75c for only 2c with every camera ordered.

Atomic Energy!

The "Years Ahead" MIRACLE LIGHTER

Flame-in-a-Flash

IMPERIAL LITEMASTER

$3.50 POST PAID

Read This Absolute Three-Way GUARANTEE

ONE—if after you receive your Litemaster you don't think it's the greatest lighter ever made at the price you may return it in 5 days for a complete refund.

TWO—If your Litemaster fails to perform perfectly any time within 90 days we will replace it for you absolutely free.

THREE—We'll keep your Litemaster in perfect working order *forever* for only 35c to cover all postage and handling costs.

One Flick Does The Trick

It's New! It's Different! It's Perfect!

No *two* ways about it! Litemaster's amazing *single* action pops it open *already lit!* No more smudged, bruised fingers from spinning friction wheels to *maybe* get a light. Flame-in-a-flash Litemaster has all the features of expensive lighters *plus*. Its just-right size fits your hand as comfortably as a fine watch; has fuel capacity for "A Thousand and One Lights" per filling; its new spun-glass wick provides a lifetime of service without change. No other lighter at *any* price can match Litemaster at its *low* price. Thousands who have suffered bruised fingers and flustered tempers trying to *coax* a light out of outdated lighters will welcome this chance to prove Litemaster's sure-fire, simplified superiority at our risk.

WE CHALLENGE COMPARISON WITH LIGHTERS SELLING FOR $10 OR MORE

COMPARE it for sure-fire simplified action — for instant flame—for lasting performance.

COMPARE it for beauty of design — for streamlined perfection of size and weight.

COMPARE it with the *best* you can find at *any* price — give it any test . . . anywhere.

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR LITEMASTER

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. LM2
608 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Please rush my Litemaster with Lifetime Spun Glass Wick and three extra flints. If not delighted I may return in 5 days for refund.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $3.50. Send my Litemaster POSTPAID
☐ Send my Litemaster C.O.D. I will pay postman $3.50 plus postage

Name_____
Please Print Clearly
Address_____
City_____ Zone____ State_____

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR CAMERA

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. PC156
608 South Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush Photomaster at $3.98 with Carrying Case for only 2c extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $4 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.
☐ Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman $4 plus postage costs.
If you want 3 rolls of No. 127 Film (enough for 48 pictures) for only 81c plus 15c postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.

☐ I am enclosing $4.96 for payment in full. Include 3 rolls of Film postpaid.
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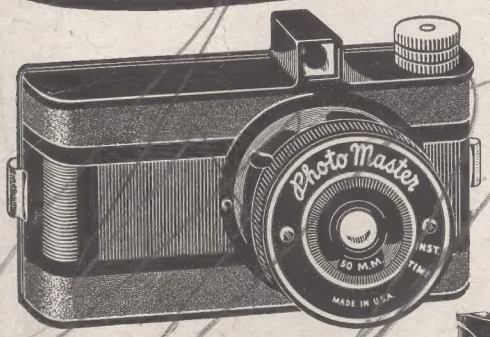

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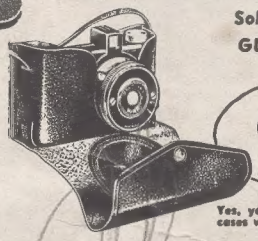

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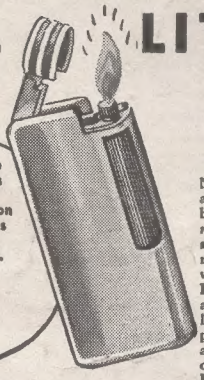

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"Guess they'll enjoy sitting by the fire, too"

A COZY fireplace is nice, but you'd purr with satisfaction over a Calvert Highball no matter *where* you enjoyed it.

You see, Calvert is a pre-war quality whiskey that's *the real thing*...so mellow and smooth it just can't be duplicated.

Which explains why, year in and year out, Calvert is reported "the whiskey most often asked for by name." If *your* plans for tonight include a friendly sip, make it a Calvert Highball. But be sure it's Calvert, if you want *the real thing!*

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE Calvert

It's the Real Thing

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits... Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits

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